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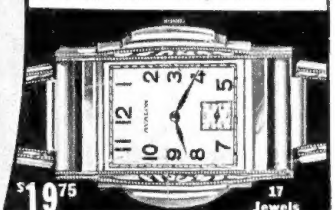

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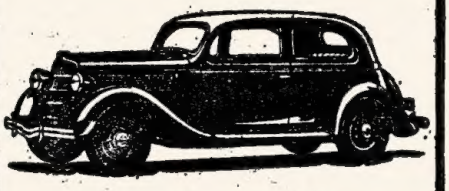

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STAR WESTERN

THE BIG 160 PAGE MAGAZINE

VOLUME THIRTEEN DECEMBER, 1937 NUMBER THREE

★ Star Novel ★

WESTWARD ROLLS AN EMPIRE! ..... **Robert E. Mahaffay** 10
Side by side with those he had sworn to destroy, Ron Brix shared the hardships and perils of his enemies' covered-wagon trek. . . . For a blood-debt was due for payment beyond the horizon's rim, and Ron must meet it—in the crimson coin of his own life blood. . . .

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Star Novelettes ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

LAW OF THE THUNDERING HERDS ..... **Walt Coburn** 56
The strangest gun-duel in the history of the cattle frontier was fought between Lafe Brandon and his friend, Jay Turley. . . . Its thundering echoes reached beyond a boothill grave, to bring back once again a fighting cowman who could not die!

COWMAN BAIT FOR A GUN-WOLF'S TRAP ..... **John G. Pearsol** 74
His body only a bullet-riddled shell smashed by his neighbors' guns, Jim Fannin, outlawed rancher, fought desperately for one more hour of life—and a last chance to blot from his once-proud name the darkling brand of thief and murderer!

KILLER, PACK YOUR WAR-BAG! ..... **Harry F. Olmsted** 98
One red moment of mistaken loyalty sent Brett Killeen to a man-made prison hell. Could he, then, having won reprieve, lend his ready guns to a hard-pressed rancher, when he could only win the dishonored, living death he had once escaped?

A BUCKSKIN REBEL GOES TO WAR ..... **Ed Earl Repp** 114
The future of a far-flung fur empire and the safety of a daughter of the untamed wilderness rested on the shoulders of Gregg Carson, free trapper, when he faced alone the slashing knives of a buckskin renegade legion!

GOLD WON'T BUY GOOD GUNMEN ..... **C. K. Shaw** 132
Far more bitter to young Dusty Dixon than the grim fact that his life was forfeit to a range-hog's guns, came the sudden, burning knowledge, that his old-time saddle-pard had taken Judas-money—as down-payment on Dusty's bushwhacked corpse!

★ ★ Star Short Stories ★ ★

TINHORN'S DEATH-MORTGAGE ..... **Gunnison Steele** 44
Buck Flame, gambler, couldn't resist one more game before final pay-off—when the life of a beautiful ranch-girl was in the pot!

HOG-TIED FOR THE HANGNOOSE ..... **Miles Overholt** 91
When Johnny Gilmore, small-spread cattleman, took those last thirteen gallows steps, he'd deliver free of charge to a killer his ranch and the girl he loved!

★ ★ ★ Star Features ★ ★ ★

UNMARKED GRAVES BLAZE THE TRAILS ..... **The Editors** 4
Though Death lay in wait along those first cattle trails, no real cowman ever turned back!

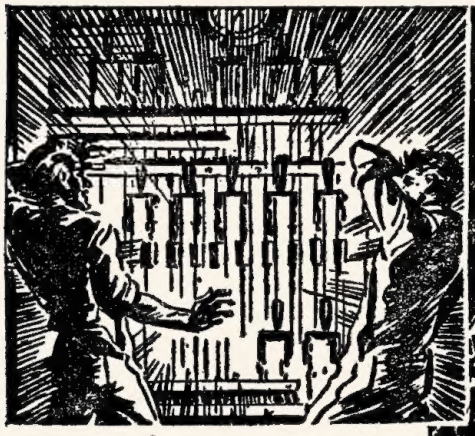
WHEN HELL FROZE ..... **The Maverick** 8
. . . Only then, Whitey Allen swore, would his strange partnership break up. . . . And on one bitter night of blasted hope, hell did *freeze!*

UP THE TRAIL ..... **A Department** 148

ALL STORIES NEW **NO REPRINTS!**

Published every month by Popular Publications, Inc., 2256 Grove Street, Chicago, Illinois. Editorial and executive offices, 205 East Forty-second Street, New York City. Harry Steeger, President and Secretary. Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter September 5, 1933, at the Post Office at Chicago, Ill., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Title registration pending at U. S. Patent Office. Copyright 1937 by Popular Publications, Inc. Single copy price 15c, U. S. A.; Canada, 20c. Yearly subscriptions in U. S. A., $1.50; Canada, $2.00. For advertising rates address Sam J. Perry, 205 East 42nd St., New York, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts, kindly enclose stamped self-addressed envelope for their return if found unavailable. The publishers cannot accept responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts, although all care will be exercised in handling them.

Panic Loomed...The Show Went On!



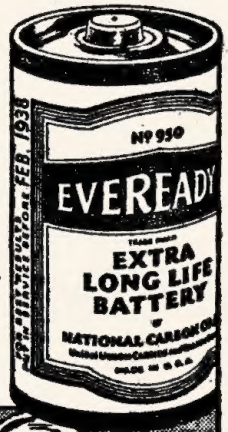
Crowded Theatre Goes Dark as Fuse Blows

"The dog-and-pony number was finishing," writes Stage Manager Frank M. Polhamius, Jr., of 195 Fuller Lane, Winnetka, Ill., "when an overloaded main fuse blew out. As the stage went black, panic threatened the lives of thousands crowding the full house.

"Part of my equipment as stage manager is my trusty 'Eveready' flashlight. Before the audience could sense that anything was wrong, I called for the curtain, dashed to the wings and played my flashlight on the apron of the stage like a baby spot.

"Fortunately, a dance team was ready to go on. In a split second they were on the stage and going through their routine in the spot furnished by my flashlight. DATED 'Eveready' batteries in that flashlight had lighted my way around dark theatres for many weeks before they were called upon to meet this spine-chilling emergency. So you can bet I realized in those critical moments just how much it can mean to buy batteries that are *fresh* and full of life. No one can ever know how many lives were saved by DATED 'Eveready' batteries that night.

(Signed) Frank M. Polhamius Jr.



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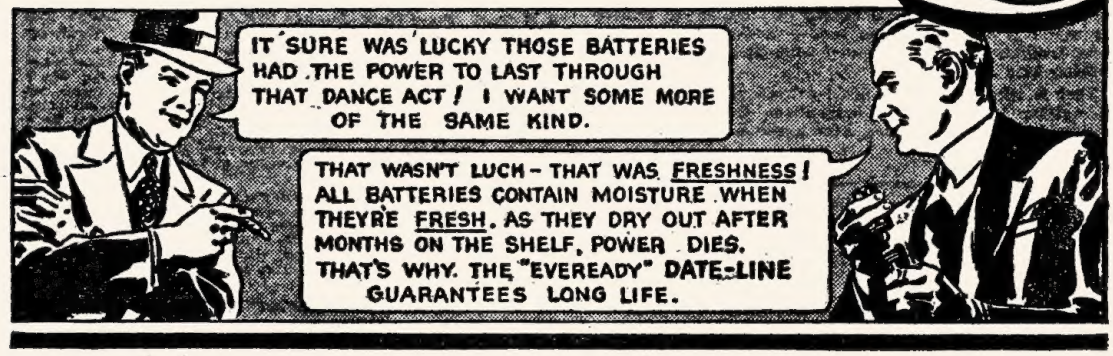
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It must have seemed to those pioneers that they were, at times, step-children of a bitter fate, for often both the weather and human enemies combined against them. Nowhere are the day-by-day deeds of resourcefulness and perseverance better illustrated than along the thundering cattle trails.

River crossings constituted one of the gravest perils of the trail, when the mud-brown white-flecked flood water, carrying in its course uprooted trees or perhaps the wreckage of some unfortunate's dwelling, must be forded by upwards of a thousand head of cattle—and delay might bring ruin to the herd owner. Better to risk a few human lives than to turn back. One resourceful cowman, faced with getting his herd across a roaring river, found himself stopped by a steep, high bank at the other side, extending for miles in each direction. There was no place where the cattle, having once swum the stream, could possibly come out safely. But the herd must go on!

He unloaded his wagons, risking his life to float them to the other side. Once there, he knocked them down, dug a runway in the steep bank, and used the boards for cleats in the rain-soaked mud so that the cattle could get a foothold to the high bank. That done, he returned, and with his cowboys swum the herd across. They lost fifty head, and one man. They rebuilt the wagons, and started on again. It was just part of the day's work.

Another old-time cowman suffered from lack of water on the drive. He had pinned his faith on a stream which had never been known to go dry, and had a herd of parched, and thirst-crazed cattle to save. But when he arrived at the crossing, there was only white, bone-dry sand.

(Continued on page 6)

How do you know you can't write?

HAVE you ever tried? Have you ever attempted even the least bit of training, under competent guidance?

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BILL'S A SAP TO WASTE HIS TIME STUDYING RADIO AT HOME
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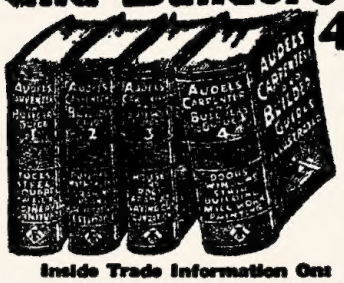

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(Continued from page 4)

He held the cattle on the bank, took the reumda of horses to a point down wind where there was less quicksand in the stream-bed. He shoved the horses out on the sand, which bent like "rubber ice" under their weight. Back and forth across the dry bed he drove the horses until the soft, treacherous footing was firm. Water began to seep onto the top of the bed, and near the close of that day he had both a stretch of clear water and good footing for his crossing. The herd got through safely.

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THE EDITORS.

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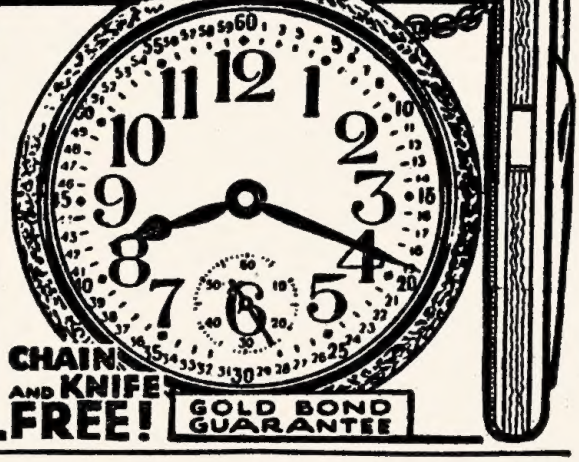

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WHEN HELL FROZE

IT WAS characteristic of Whitey Allen, after he had left the Brazos country and built up his little spread on the Lost Creek range, that he should greet with open arms anyone from East Texas.

This man's name was Joe Walsh, and he came to Whitey's ranch one midnight with a bullet in him and signs of a hard, fast ride in the dust and sweat of his clothes and on his blown pony. Whitey didn't waste time in talk; he fixed Joe Walsh up the best he could, and hoped that no posse would come thundering up wanting to know things which Whitey considered no one's business but Joe's.

No posse did come, but Whitey Allen had a firm idea that Joe was just resting up from riding the long, dark trails. He expected to wake up some morning and find Joe long gone, with maybe a horse and some shells missing from the ranch, but Joe seemed to like it there. He stuck.

In town, folks looked at Joe Walsh from the corners of their eyes whenever he rode in. There wasn't any mistaking the way he wore his two black-butted guns, nor the hawkish cast of his features and the catlike way he moved around. The brand of the owlhoot was unmistakably on him; yet, try as he would the sheriff couldn't tie Joe up to any of his dog-eared reward dodgers.

That didn't stop the tongues wagging, however. One day Whitey, in town alone for supplies, overheard a few slurring speculations concerning Joe Walsh's past. Whitey took two steps up to the man who was doing most of the talking there at the bar. He stood before him, legs wide-spread, thumbs hooked in his belt and his hat cocked at a fighting angle over his left eye.

"That gent's my partner, mister," he said, very quietly. "And unless you feel like backin' your loud talk, you better admit you been lyin'."

The man, feeling the sentiment of the crowd was still with him, began to bluster. Then he shut up, because it's hard to do much talking with a bone-hard fist in your mouth. . . .

Whitey blew on his knuckles, gave a yank to his hat-brim, completed his purchases and rode out back to his ranch.

There grinning a little, Whitey met Joe at the corral.

"Joe," he said, "I got a proposition. How'd you like to be partners with me? I got a nice little spread here, an a growin' herd of white-faces. Besides, we both come from Texas. . . ."

Joe Walsh shoved out his hand. "Fine, Whitey," he said.

"Partners till hell freezes!" said Whitey heartily. "You'll find this a lot better than—uh—driftin', like I reckon you been doin'."

But though Joe shouldered half his share of the work readily enough, he was more taciturn than before. And when the first hint of a tough winter swept down from the North, Joe volunteered to go out to the line shack and take care of the cattle on that range. More than half Whitey's stock was wintering there; there'd be water holes to break, cows to tail up and feed during the long, bleak winter.

Shortly after Joe Walsh left, a bunch of neighbor ranchers called.

"This partner of yours, Whitey," said the spokesman, "just how well do you know him? What did he do before he came out here? Because we been missing a lot of stock this fall, and sign sort of points in his direction. Mebbe you could kinda help us out. . . ."

These were reputable, honest cowmen, trying as hard as Whitey to make a go of things against overwhelming odds. So Whitey stifled his resentment and whatever impulse he had to shove a gun-muzzle at them.

"If Joe Walsh is good enough for me to be partners with, he's good enough for you to have as a neighbor," he said. "I'm backin' his play—down to the last white chip. When you got some proof, come back an' we'll talk it over."

Whitey couldn't leave the range just then, and finally when he did get a chance he rode out toward the line shack under a lowering, lead-colored bank of clouds. When he arrived, Joe Walsh was not there, nor was there sign that he'd been there for three days. However, Whitey found a couple of empty jugs, and dirty dishes stacked high. Also evidence that at least two men had visited him. . . .

Frowning, Whitey went out again. All that day he looked for strays in the sheltered cutbanks, but he could find none.

Then, on a snow-covered rise of ground, Whitey glimpsed some cattle being shoved down off his range. Two men were driving the herd, and with them was the unmistakable figure of Joe Walsh, straight up in his saddle, working as hard as the rest at chousing the cows along.

Whitey cursed through thin, cold-pinched lips. But even more than his anger and disappointment at his mistaken judgment, his freely given faith and trust, there was something else. It was bitter heartache that Joe Walsh, a good cowman and likeable sort of gent, would throw the whole game to make a little money on those cows. . . . Joe had seemed about everything Whitey wanted in a partner. But there, plain before Whitey was the evidence. A man's eyes can't lie to him. . . .

They were beyond rifle range, and Whitey set out doggedly along their trail. But the snow began; a flurry of wet, sticky flakes which soon changed to a biting needle-like blast lashed on by a cutting wind. Sign and sight were blotted out. Whitey looked like a snow-covered mummy as he kept on, blindly letting the horse have his head.

That night, hopelessly lost, Whitey was tempted more than once to drop off anywhere and sleep. . . . His body cried out in fatigue; the numbing chill sapped his strength.

"Partners till hell freezes!" he echoed bitterly. "Well, she's froze plumb solid tonight!" He'd track down Joe and kill him—if he ever lived through this icy, snowbound hell. . . .

Before dawn, however, the storm stopped. And then, as the red of a new sun was showing a silent, snow-wrapped world, Whitey dragged his gun. There, closer than before, were the two rustlers, with Joe Walsh behind them, hurrying them along with the herd!

They saw him at the same time. The man ahead wheeled quickly in his saddle and leveled his gun. The sharp echo of the shot rolled on the the snow-still air, and Whitey felt a searing pain in his chest and felt the warmth of blood from his wound. He spurred toward them, clutching the horn with one hand to keep himself in the saddle. He shot, saw the man who had shot him keel over, and then with his last fading moment of consciousness, he saw the second rustler line his sights, and saw Joe Walsh's gun come up. Then as Whitey's finger pressed on the trigger of his empty gun, the white ground rushed up to meet him. . . .

Later, he vaguely realized that someone was holding up his head, forcing liquor into his mouth. He looked up, batted his eyes. It was Joe.

"Don't blame you, fella," said Joe huskily, "for thinkin' I'd run a sandy on you. When these two gents that I'd knowed back in the old days came along"—he jerked his head toward the bodies lying in the snow—"they caught me dead to rights. Like a fool, I'd taken my gun off, and they had me. I figgered I was worth a heap sight more to you alive than dead, so I played in with 'em. That blizzard give me a chance to sorta get the upper hand, an' when you turned up on our trail this mornin', I was herdin' 'em back on our range, with one of their guns. They—they got me in the side, though, so I couldn't work fast enough when they saw you comin'. . . . I'm your partner till hell freezes, Whitey. I just want you to know it. . . ."

Whitey grinned wanly. "Till hell freezes, huh? Well, it done froze last night, but we're still partners. Now let's take care of them cattle. . . !"

—THE MAVERICK

WESTWARD ROLLS

Hatred for the Mormon legion a living flame within him, young Ron Brix joined their wilderness caravan, stifling his bitter arrogant pride to share with them grub and bullets. . . . For a blood-debt was due beyond the last frontier—and Ron must live to make final payment—in Death's own coin!

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By standing up in his stirrups he could see, beyond the rim of the shallow coulee, the farmhouse with its pair of pole sheds and fenced pasture in which half a dozen cows stood hump-backed against the rain. It didn't look like a battleground. It looked ordinary; dreary and helpless.

"That the place, Link?" he asked the leader jerkily. "I thought you fellers pushed all the Mormons across the river? I didn't know there was any left on this side."

He could see Link Sawtrey nodding, his dark, hawkish face curiously tight. "There's a few that've been hidin' out, thinkin' we'd skip 'em. Well, by God, we ain't going to! We're bootin' 'em out of Illinois, every man-jack of 'em."

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Ron Brix scowled with the ferocity of his eighteen years. Everybody talked about what rascals the Mormons were, and what a good thing it was to get rid of them. They were horse thieves and counterfeiters and robbers, folks said, and mean as a bull with a new ring in his nose. He was glad to be in on the fun of helping with the job of driving them away.

He had missed out on the excitement three weeks ago, when almost every able-bodied man in the country had ganged up on the Mormon town of Nauvoo and harried the last of the Mormons across the Mississippi. That had been really something, according to what he had heard. There had been fighting, and bullets flying, and people killed.

And he had missed it! He hadn't been able to think about fun then. Jonathan Brix, his father, had been dying, shot through the stomach from ambush. The shock of that tragedy had left Ron's mind clogged with dull, slow-turning pain, and when Link Sawtrey had stopped and asked him if he wanted to come along, he had jumped at the chance.

It seemed like a game, sort of—putting the skids under a stray Mormon who hadn't obeyed when he was told to get out. Only the toughness of the three men with Link Sawtrey put a shade of doubt into Ron Brix's head.

They were hardcases, and half drunk already. He didn't know their names. One of them was tall, burly and silent. The second was pale-eyed and gaunt-faced and his lips made a harsh smacking noise when he gulped at the nearly-empty whiskey bottle. The third was an undersized wizened man in butternut pants, a linsey-woolsey jacket. A big knife was in his belt.

Ron didn't want them to think that he was just a kid, so he said sturdily, "How we goin' to work this, Link? Just ride down there, all of us together?"

Link Sawtrey spat before he answered. The pale-eyed man was looking away and turning the bottle in his thick fingers. The burly gent whistled softly between his teeth, and the one with the knife was stropping the blade on a calloused palm.

"Why, kid," Link Sawtrey said gently, "maybe that wouldn't be the best way. We thought we'd let you go first, seein' as you'd naturally want to pay the Mormon's off for your dad's killin'."

Puzzled, Ron stared across the pricking white ears of his old gelding. "There wasn't anybody that knew," Ron said reluctantly. "They just found him, that was all. He was takin' money over to La Harpe to buy the land next to ours. Somebody shot him so's to get the money. Nobody knows it was the Mormons. . . .

TALKING about that still hurt Ron Brix. It was only a month ago that word had come to him about his father—found dying on the prairie half way to La Harpe. He had got a wagon and brought him back to the sod cabin and nursed him for two weeks before he died. During those two weeks Jonathan Brix had spoken only one phrase.

Link Sawtrey's dark, hawkish face had hardened. "Why, kid, sure the Mormons done it! That's why I figured you'd want to come along."

Ron cried hoarsely, "You *ain't* sure of that!"

"Plumb sure, kid."

"But, damn it, nobody else told me that. How do you know?"

Link shrugged. "It was just at the time the Mormons was bein' pinched the worst. A lot of 'em had got away already. The rest of 'em needed to scrape up money 'fore they could leave. Here, if you got any doubts, look at this." Sawtrey fumbled in the inner pocket of his coat and pulled out a crumpled paper. "I thought you knew, so I plumb forgot about it."

Ron Brix leaned over in the saddle, his

hand reaching out. The paper was a torn printed sheet, and on it was a dark stain of blood.

"It's out of the *Book of Mormon*," Sawtrey said easily. "I was comin' past there after you'd picked your old man up. I stopped to scout around, an' that's what I found. Jonathan shook one slug out of his gun 'fore they got him, remember. He must've put that slug into somebody. That gent wanted a plaster to stop the bleedin', an' he used the only thing he had that'd do. One of the pages slipped away from him, an' I found it."

There was a choking tightness in Ron Brix's throat as he stared at the blood-stained paper. Until now he had had but one slight means of tracing the killer. This was something else; something concrete.

His voice shaking, he blurted, "Damn 'em, Link! Damn 'em! I'll whittle my pay out of 'em for this. Every blamed one of 'em!"

"That's talkin', kid! Figured you'd feel that way." Link Sawtrey jerked his head down toward the farmhouse. "These Mormons get cagey as hell. If we go in a bunch, he'll smell a rat. You slide down there first, kid. He won't think nothin' about you comin' alone. Put your gun on him, an' if you have to plug him, do it. We'll slip around an' come in from the other side."

Ron Brix said, "Sure," thickly.

He rode out of the coulee at a slow gallop. Anger was growing in him, making his breath come hard. He had started out with these men this afternoon for the fun of it, snatching at a break in his dull loneliness after the long and bitter vigil with his father. But this wasn't fun any more. It was grim, deadly business.

The ring of an ax against wood came from the lean-to against the house. Ron Brix rode there. He pulled in and lifted the gun from across his cantle before the man saw him.

The man straightened, leaning his ax against the block. He was broad-shouldered but stooped a little, and his full beard was salted with gray. Square-cornered steel spectacles contrasted queerly with the curving wrinkles about his gentle eyes.

He nodded in a friendly way. "Howdy, brother. My name's Harper. You're just in time for supper, if pretty thin stew will do."

Ron Brix stared. He didn't know just what he had expected to find. Some sort of a snarling hardcase, maybe; a man who looked like a horse thief and a killer. At any rate, someone besides a gentle old man like this—an old man whose bent shoulders and tired eyes reminded Ron a little of Jonathan Brix.

But these Mormons were cagey, Link had pointed out. Ron said harshly, "You own this place?"

Harper, shadowed by the dusk, wiped his sweaty palms on patched homespun trousers tucked into worn boots. "Well, I do, but I'm tryin' to sell. Got to move my family across the river."

"An' you're a Mormon, ain't you?"

"Yes, I'm a Mormon. Proud to be one. That supper now, brother—I got this wood to tote in." He stooped and began to pick up the split chunks.

Ron felt foolish, sitting there in the saddle holding the gun so tightly in his hands. Maybe he was being tricked; maybe this Harper was just play-acting to trap him. He stepped out of the saddle gingerly.

The old farmer nodded toward Ron's mount. "That's a good white horse you have there. Not a runner, I reckon, but he looks like he could get down an' pull when there was pullin' to be done. When there's a piece of hard ground to be plowed—" He didn't finish.

A woman's scream lifted piercingly through the dusk. Ron jerked his head toward the sheds to the left. He heard the wood held in the crook of Harper's

arm tumble to the hard-packed dirt. A girl in a light-colored dress darted out of the nearest shed. The pale-eyed man who had been with Link Sawtrey came plunging behind her, his rifle gripped in one hand. The girl was swifter, but she stumbled.

Harper brushed past Ron, running heavily toward the girl. The pale-eyed man was kneeling over her, a splay-fingered hand against her breast holding her down. Then the man heard Harper calling. He straightened swiftly, whipped up his rifle and shot. The old farmer jerked to a stop and spun half around. A curtain of blood was suddenly pouring down across his kindly eyes, over his nose, into his beard.

Clawing fingers seemed to wrench savagely at Ron Brix's heart. He recalled so vividly that when he had found old Jonathan, his father's face had looked like that. This wasn't fun; it wasn't even vengeance. A helpless old man. . . .

Clearly Ron Brix heard the girl's quick, stifled sobbing. Harper had fallen. She had scrambled up and darted to him. Then toward them lurched the pale-eyed renegade, shifting his hands and gripping the rifle by its barrel.

Ron shouted and got a swiveling, evil glance from pale eyes. The clubbed gun lifted for a smashing blow. Then something snapped the bonds of uncertainty shackling him and the squirrel rifle was at his shoulder. He felt the kick of the stock, and through the puff of powder-smoke he saw the white, amazed face of the girl.

Reaction hit him like a blow in the stomach. He knew where that light but deadly bullet had gone, as surely as if his target had been a frozen rabbit instead of a man. With a bullet hole just above his nose, the pale-eyed renegade was dead. Not slightly wounded, not scratched, but dead.

And he had done it!

THE sound of a voice ripping out curses pulled Ron Brix back to his senses. Figures were flitting toward him through the half dark from the farther shed. Link Sawtrey and the other two were coming at him, shooting as they came. The thought sank home that he was as much a target for their rage now as the old Mormon.

A bullet, flicking through his thin shirt and furrowing the skin of his arm, stung him into action. He dropped to one knee, and reloading with hasty care, triggered another ball. The range was greater this time, and the light deceptive, but the shot drew a yelp of pain. He heard Link Sawtrey bawl, "That kid's a devil with a gun!" The three charging figures halted their rush, melted back into the gloom.

The girl was trying to lift old Harper, and failing at it. Ron went forward in a crouch, boosted the limp old man across his shoulder, and staggered with him back to the farmhouse.

"In here," the girl directed with a coolness that startled him, and led the way to a room beyond the kitchen. Ron was back and jamming a table against the boltless door when the first bullet splintered through the wood. From outside, for the next minute or two, a rifle and a six-shot pistol maintained a slashing fusillade.

Ron Brix waited, crouching against the floor. The walls were flimsy and not proof against bullets. The shooting slackened, and a voice—not Sawtrey's—yelled, "You comin' out of there, Brix, or do we gun you out?"

He didn't answer. Hunched there in the dark, he was a little frightened of what he had done. There was that dead man out there, for one thing. The remaining three were killers, he knew now. He didn't mean to give up the old Mormon to them, but he understood that his fight here would be a hopeless one. Soon they'd start burning the place, and that,

sooner or later, would be the end. . . .

The voice yelled again, "We'll get a hundred men if it takes that many. Or we'll roast you out of there like a damn pig!"

Ron didn't answer, and again bullets began to slap through the walls. There was only a wooden shutter over the kitchen window. He pried up one of the boards, and pushed the muzzle of his gun through.

He didn't realize that the girl had come back until he heard the soft intake of her breath close to him. She was saying with a steadiness that surprised him, "We can't stay here, can we?"

"Don't see how we'll get out," Ron told her. "Not with carryin' the old feller."

"He's my father. He'll be able to walk in a little while, I think. The bullet just tore his scalp and stunned him."

She was so close that Ron seemed to feel the warmth of her. His eyes were accustomed now to the dark. He could make out the pale oval of her face. It was about on a level with his shoulder, and it seemed that what scanty light remained was gathered in her eyes, giving them a soft glow. He felt acutely, somehow, that she was less afraid than he.

Yet her voice trembled slightly as she whispered, "That man would have killed him—if you hadn't stopped it." When he had nothing to say to that, she added, "Maybe you didn't know when you saved my father that we're Mormons."

"Yes, I knew it," he said huskily.

"I had to tell you that," she murmured desperately. "Helping us will only get you into trouble. You don't have to stay. You've done enough for us already."

A vague shape surged out from the nearest shed. Ron Brix snapped a quick shot, but it was a miss. Reaching for his powder horn he muttered, "I'm stayin', anyhow. But we got to get out of here. Is there any place you can go that's safe?"

"Only one. Across the river. Most of the other Mormons are there, you know. We should have gone before this, but we haven't any money, and father wanted to sell."

Ron Brix turned that over stolidly in his mind. It was clear now that Link Sawtrey and the others had come only in search of plunder. They had believed, evidently, that Harper had money or valuables. He had only been brought along as decoy. He wondered what had made him rebel as he had. This girl and her father were Mormons, and Mormons had murdered Jonathan. He had that crumpled, blood-stained scrap of paper in his pocket to prove it. He had reason enough to hate them.

And now he was debating helping them further. For he knew what would happen to them if he didn't, as he had found out when he saw the bloody, haggard face of old Harper. That wasn't the sort of re-

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venge he wanted. He stirred himself.

"Well," he said bluntly, not looking at the girl, "if there's any way to get you to the river, I'll do it!"

CHAPTER TWO

Beyond Hell's Doorway

RON BRIX stared out through the shutter. There wasn't much time to decide anything. They had to get out of the house, and he didn't see how it was to be done. It was quiet outside now; probably Sawtrey and the others were hatching their scheme to bring fire to the farmhouse.

He left the girl at the window and went into the bedroom. The old farmer was conscious now, able to talk and sit up.

Ron said curtly, "There ain't a rag of hope for us if we don't pull out mighty quick. Can you travel?"

The old man sighed. "This way is God's will, I reckon. I can make a stab at it."

The weakness in Harper's voice was indication enough that he wouldn't be able to foot it very far. Ron growled, "If we had a horse or two—"

"I got five head in a pasture down by the creek. But it's close to half a mile away."

That would do, Ron thought, if they could get to them. All they needed was the start. There was a way to get that, if his guess as to Sawtrey's purpose here was correct. He went back to the girl, told her briefly what would have to be done.

She left him, and he called out through the shutter, "Don't fire the house, boys. We're through fightin'."

He heard nothing for a moment, then a voice answered, "We ain't, mister. There's a dead man out here to be answered for."

"He got what he asked for," Ron snapped. "We don't want somethin' for nothin', though. Harper's willin' to buy his way out."

"Yeah? How much?"

"I ain't sure just how much. Every penny he's got. We'll tell you where it's buried if you'll swap us two broncs an' a chance to clear out."

There was a long period of silence before the voice purred, "Sure, that's fair enough. You tell us where the old devil's got it buried, an' as soon as she's dug up you get the ponies."

A hard grin formed on Ron Brix's lips. That easy acquiescence was the tip-off that the second half of the bargain would not be kept. He called carefully, "All right. We'll be trustin' you. Dig in the left hand corner at the back of the far shed. Make it fast, will you, boys? The old feller's head is in bad shape, an' we got to get him to a sawbones."

It was so dark now that he could see nothing in the yard, but ears keenly tuned brought him the sound of boots pumping soggily out there in the mud. Two of them at least, he judged, were making hastily for the shed. The other one, unwillingly, would hang back to keep an eye on the farmhouse.

Ron said softly over his shoulder. "All right. We'll try for it now."

The girl, who had changed to dark shirt and denim overalls, was steadying her father. "We can't take anything with us?" she asked.

"You're alive, aren't you?" he told her grimly. "You may not be that an hour from now."

Ron inched the door open cautiously, and went through first, gun crooked in his elbow, an icy spur roweling his backbone. The splatter of rain on the wet ground helped to cover the sound of their movements. Then a hundred feet from the house Ron stopped to listen. Faintly came the scrape of digging implements, the mutter of excited swearing. They had made it. They had their start!

It was only the beginning, though. Ron Brix gave his rifle to the girl, and took one of old Harper's arms across his shoulders. The farmer was panting between clenched teeth, and now and again a stifled groan broke from his throat.

It was only half a mile to the creek pasture, but it seemed ten times that. An eternity of floundering on slippery sod, splashing through muddy potholes, stumbling on with the burden of the old man growing more and more of a dead weight.

"This way," the girl's voice came at him out of the dark ahead. "There it is!"

He swung toward her, and as he did it the snarl of gunfire broke out in a wrathful chatter behind them. "Found out we slickered 'em," he grunted. "They're jumpin' the house, an' it won't take 'em long to get started this way!"

HE WENT to work silently and swiftly. The horses were work animals, and not hard to rope. They had no saddles, but the girl brought two battered rope hackamores. Ron boosted the old farmer across a broad back, scrambling up behind to hold him there.

The girl came up with them. "It's five or six miles to the river," she said brokenly. "There's a boat—if only we can get to it!"

Ron Brix saw then the spear of red crawling into the black void of the sky from the direction of the farmhouse. The renegades had fired the place, evidently. He goaded the animal to the best pace it could muster, and through the soggy plop of hoofs he heard the girl sobbing quietly. He could understand that.

Everything she and her father had was gone. He had felt the same helpless emptiness when Jonathan had died. It occured to him suddenly that he didn't know this girl's name or what she looked like. He shrugged. He didn't care. She and her father were Mormons.

Hard-ridden, the horses were blowing. The rain had increased to a sluicing downpour, and a knifing cold rode with it. Ron peered ahead into the wet blackness, trying to concentrate on the footing, but his mind turned back annoyingly to the girl. If she reached the river, and crossed it, where would she go? Nauvoo had been a big city of twenty thousand or more souls. It was empty now. Most of the Mormons were strung out along some three hundred miles between the Mississippi and Missouri.

He had heard how the Mormons had been driven from Independence and Far West before being hounded from Nauvoo. Where would they go now? Beyond the Missouri lay wilderness, rugged mountains, Indian country. . . .

Harper, sagging down across the horse's neck, lost his hold and almost fell. Ron pulled in, sat there listening. Faintly over the din of the rain he heard the beat of fast-coming hoofs. Sure that the river presented the only means of escape, Sawtrey was riding hard to intercept them.

Ron growled at the girl, put his heels into the ribs of the awkward mount under him. If there was a rush left in him, he had to use it.

Both horses, already worked hard that day, were staggering. Ron Brix's jaw clamped up tightly. Old Harper was reeling helplessly, and holding him upright absorbed all of Ron's attention. Pouring out of the dead blackness, the rain hammered his back and his bare head.

The girl was at his side, crouching along her mount's neck. He heard her scream, "This way! We're below the boat!"

She swerved, vanished in the darkness, and he turned to follow. The muffled roar of a pistol shot droned from behind. From his left surged up the gurgle and slap of the swollen river. Sawtrey could probably hear them, but in the dark they would be hard to find.

There were minutes of plunging along blindly, the rain slashing against his eyes, then his mount rammed into a riderless horse and stopped, snorting. Ron heard the girl's voice shouting something, but he couldn't make out the words. He slid down, and cradling the limp frame of old Harper in his arms, went toward her. His boots splashed into water. He heard the rattle of brush being thrown aside, made out the shadowy form of a skiff with the girl bending over it.

Dragged up on the shore, it was too much for her strength to move.

Ron laid the old man across the thwarts, got his hands under the prow and heaved. The skiff slipped out through the mud. Ron held it there as the girl floundered past him with oars and tumbled in over the side. He half turned his head. There was a jumble of shouts behind him; and then he picked up Link Sawtrey's strident roar.

Something held him motionless there, his hand on the boat. The girl was crying in a husky whisper, "Push us out! Push us out!"

A shove, and the boat would be floating down the river, then he could dart away and lose himself in the darkness. There was an agonized, desperate note in the girl's voice now.

Until this tense, racing moment he had not even remotely considered going in the boat. His job was finished when he'd brought the girl and her father here. That was all he figured he was responsible for.

But now, in the rain-washed night, with the girl begging him in a choked undertone to push them away, and with Sawtrey's angry shouts ringing in his ears, two thoughts hit him savagely. If he went back to the farm he would have the killing of the pale-eyed man to answer for; done in defense of a Mormon, he could expect no leniency. More important, he was sure now that a Mormon had murdered Jonathan. That Mormon must be somewhere among the camps strung westward from the Mississippi.

Ron Brix waded out, gave a hard thrust with his feet, and flung himself on his belly across the bow of the skiff.

STRAINING his eyes, he could see movement but no figures on the bank behind him. Spots of flame sprang out on the dark curtain, and the crash of shots rolled over the water. As the river bore them rapidly to the south, those sounds faded and died. Little waves tapped at the sides of the skiff with dull monotony; slanting rain pelted the river with a hissing chatter.

Ron Brix fumbled for the oars and thrust them between the pins. He rowed with a splashing awkwardness, using the current to keep his direction.

In the stern he dimly saw the shape of the girl, hunched and motionless, her father's shoulders resting against her knees. Her rapid, strained breathing broke off suddenly, and she cried, "Why did you come?"

Ron Brix said grimly, "To kill a man—if I can find him."

"A Mormon?"

"I reckon that's what he is."

The girl's voice was breaking. "Then I won't take you there!"

She was on the verge of hysteria, Ron recognized, but there was a hard stubbornness in him now. "You can't help yourself," he stated bluntly. "You'd never make it alone. I'm goin' across. I'll comb your damn Mormon camps till I find the man I want."

Her strength gone, the girl burst out, "Then you're no better than the rest of them! Haven't you and your kind done enough to us already? All we want is a chance to live, but you won't even give us that!"

Ron Brix was tired, angry, and his mind was sorely disturbed. "I guess," he growled irritably, "the Mormons got

nothin' but what was comin' to 'em."

"That's a lie!" she flung at him between bitter, hysterical sobs. "But you've done all you can to hurt us. We're leaving this country forever. We're going west, into the Rockies, or past them. We'll go so far no one will follow us! There'll be land there for us; there'll be a place to live. There won't be any mobs to burn us out, or tar-and-feather decent men. You'd like to see us wiped out or scattered. Well, we never will be!"

The lash of her words stung Ron, and he sneered, "You won't get your bunch of horse-thieves and counterfeiters to go thirty miles into those mountains. Wait an' see."

He rowed on stolidly after that, troubled and not fully understanding this thing that had happened to him. The cold was dulling his mind, stiffening his muscles. Back there in the rain-drenched night somewhere was the little farm he and his father had worked. He was rowing away from it, leaving it behind him. It seemed weeks ago that he had ridden away from it with Link Sawtrey. A boy looking for some fun. There hadn't been any fun, and he wasn't a boy any longer. He was a man, and his boyish eagerness had crystallized into a man's harsh purpose. But how he would achieve that purpose, or where, he didn't know.

What he did know was that he felt only contempt and hatred for Mormons, though the girl's outburst troubled him a little. They were a bad lot, he told himself; their projected journey into the West was a wild farce which would never come to pass.

And somewhere among them was the man who had murdered Jonathan. . . .

It was not yet dawn when a low muttering from old Harper made Ron Brix turn his head. A few hundred yards off, red fires were flickering feebly. With the last of his strength, he made for them, and sent up a hoarse shout.

Then the skiff was sliding in among rustling reeds. Men were calling, talking excitedly, crowding in around the boat. He tried to get up and was so stiff from the cold that he pitched on his face. Hands caught him, lifted him free.

He heard old Harper murmuring huskily, "Judy and me—we're all right. Take care of that boy, there. He's a mighty fine one."

Another voice exclaimed, "They're half froze, the lot of 'em. Doggone my hide, boys, if it ain't Harper!"

Lanterns were bobbing in the dark, and more men were running and shouting, "It's Harper! Eben Harper! Harper's here!"

Ron Brix was too tired to be curious or to care. He had meant to refuse Mormon food, but when they held a bowl of hot gruel to his lips he sucked at it. Then they were rolling him into warm blankets and, almost instantly, he fell asleep

CHAPTER THREE

Hostages of the Unmarked Trails

IT WAS late in the raw and sodden morning when he awoke. He had been placed in a tent, but the rain had leaked through and soaked his blankets and the ground under him. Hell of a place to put him, he thought.

He was shivering and his teeth were chattering and his face felt strangely hot. His head was aching viciously. He climbed to his feet awkwardly, clenching his teeth, and he had to fight to keep upright. The tent was whirling and dipping. He steadied it grimly, jerking his head so that his eyes would focus, and went outside.

Rain was still falling. He stood in it unheedingly, anger and contempt still holding sway in his mind, his glance roving over this spot that the sullen gray light now exposed.

Its misery and squalor pierced even the armor of Ron Brix's surly temper. Here were the last of the Mormons. Here was the remnant which had not made an early escape—the few hundreds driven by Link Sawtrey and the mob at the point of bayonets out of Nauvoo and across the Mississippi.

For protection against the driving rain and the early winter cold they had only a few ragged tents; some had rigged up makeshift shelters out of brush or blankets propped up on sticks; here and there were families huddled on the wet ground with only a leaky wagon box for a roof.

Scorn swept over Ron Brix's square, ruddy-bronze face. Was this tattered company part of the army that was to storm the mountain barriers of the West? He thought of the thin, wheat-flavored gruel they had given him the night before. No kind of food for a weary, half-frozen man, but it was all they had, probably. They were starving here, huddled on the river bank like rats whose holes had been flooded.

The hammering in his head beat ruthlessly at his temples. One night of it here had given him a hellish fever. Half of these people, probably, were sick, dying. Precious few of them would ever hit the westward trail.

Dizzy and sick, he ran a work-calloused hand through his short black hair. It would take more than a touch of fever to stop him, though. He'd get out of this hell-hole. There were more Mormons strung along all the way to the Missouri.

He'd told that girl he was going to comb the camps. Well, he would. They'd wait for him. Go west? He didn't believe it. That took guts. This collection of whipped and starving outcasts wouldn't go a thousand feet, much less a thousand miles. The man he wanted was here somewhere. He knew how to find him—and he would find him.

A hand laid against his arm made Ron Brix stumble around. A bearded man in a torn coat gave him a friendly nod and said, "Brother, Eben Harper has been askin' for you. If you'd like to come along—"

The man's face and the camp were slipping away from the focus of Ron's bloodshot eyes. Ron blurted, "Tell him to go to hell! I've got nothin' to see him about."

It wasn't until then he saw the girl standing just behind the bearded fellow. And he wouldn't have recognized her if it hadn't been for the familiar ring of her voice as she murmured, "Thanks, Luke. I'll talk to him."

The bearded man turned away, and then Ron was facing her. He fought to subdue that raging hell in his head, setting his teeth against the weakness and the sickness sweeping over him. For a moment, he got a steady, straight look at her.

He hadn't seen much beauty in women, but this girl Judy Harper had it. A cloth was wrapped about her head, but under it a thick mass of finely-spun brown hair shaded into a rich auburn. She stood with almost a defiant straightness, her wet dress clinging to the firmly-molded curves of her figure. In her brown eyes was that same glow he had observed in the dark of the farmhouse, yet in them now was a vibrant disdain and anger.

"My father sent for you," she said clearly. "He doesn't know what kind of a man you are."

Shock after shock of pain beat against Ron Brix's temples. The details of the girl's face melted away. "Then tell him!" he croaked. "You know, don't you?"

The girl stamped her foot. "He won't believe me. He thinks he can trust you."

Ron Brix's laugh was a wrenched-out, mocking gasp. "Trust me? When I'd like to see every Mormon horse-thief and murderer strung up? Come along. I'll tell him!"

JUDY HARPER turned abruptly, and he went after her. His walk was a reeling, drunken stagger, and he cursed himself because his legs performed so leadenly. The muddy ground was tilting crazily; the surly gray sky overhead careened.

They came to a high-wheeled freight wagon. Eben Harper was lying under it, propped up on a blanket-covered heap of branches. His square-cornered steel spectacles seemed ridiculously huge; his gray-salted dark beard appeared to flow down over the whole of his chest. Ron planted his feet wide apart so that he wouldn't fall. There seemed to be a blistering heat to the rain; his face was burning up.

There was a hole in Harper's enormous beard. He was saying, "Why, son, you're sick. It's the fever. Maybe you better—"

"Sick, hell! I don't need any damned Mormon to tell me what to do. You wanted to see me, didn't you? Well, here I am."

Harper's gentle voice came faintly, from a great distance. "Yes, son, I wanted to see you. Wanted to thank you, for one thing. I waited too long on the other side, I reckon. Thought I could get money for these folks here. But that's past. There's wagons comin' from Winter Quarters to pick us up. We'll winter there an' then, son, we'll be headin' West. A new start, that'll be, and nobody to hinder a man from makin' his life a good one."

Ron Brix laughed bitingly. "You'll never get there! Your pack of murderin' blacklegs won't even start!" The wagon seemed to Ron's fevered senses to have swollen till it towered over Ron's head; it seemed to be collapsing on him, like an undermined cliff.

Eben Harper was talking again. His words came in snatches, as if he were talking into the teeth of a stormy wind: "Yes, son, we'll get there. . . . Don't know just where the place is, but we'll find it. . . . You're not a Mormon, Judy told me. . . . Want you to think about goin' with us—new country—need straight young fellows. . . . Courage. . . . Nerve. . . ."

It seemed to Ron Brix that his head was exploding. Harper and the wagon and the camp swirled sickeningly. All the strength had drained out of his limbs. He was weaving, about to fall, and he couldn't move his feet.

In a fury, he tried to lift a fist. "Damn you," he croaked. "Damn the whole bunch of you! I'll see you in hell 'fore I'll hook up with your outfit! Somewhere along here there's a murderin'—"

But Ron Brix couldn't stand up any more. He couldn't see. Ragged pain was tearing through him. Out of a black void a voice said gently, "Reckon he didn't know how bad fever can be. He's a good boy. We got to keep him alive if we can."

He didn't feel anything when he hit the ground. . . .

For Ron Brix the weeks that followed were raging torment. During them he had lucid moments and clear impressions of what was going on around him. Most of the time he was tossing in the grip of semi-madness brought on by his illness. Incredible nightmares tortured him, and there were times when the reality he saw was so grim that he had trouble separating it from the tormenting, feverish visions.

He awoke lying on a blanket in the bed of a jolting wagon. The gray canvas tilt bloomed above him, and by turning his head he saw through the open end.

Sick as he was, the sight was a bitter one. Stained yellow to their hips, men were plodding through clinging mud, shoulders hunched and bent under heavy packs. The long, crawling line stretched back from the tail-gate like a stricken snake—jerking, halting, jerking on again.

There were some wagons, drawn by yoked oxen. There was a lumbering, swaying hay rack. There were farm carts,

garbage carts from Nauvoo, two-wheeled trundles, wheelbarrows which were thrust along doggedly. Wagons mired. Bundles and packs were dropped; gaunt and weary shoulders heaved wheels free of the gumbo.

Women with sick children in their arms stumbled along, fell, were picked up and stumbled on again. Crawling wagons, mud-covered effigies of men who fought their way foot by foot, women with a courage that would not let them give up—all of them toiling on, ant-like, under a drab sky out of which rain poured relentlessly. The cold that pierced tattered clothing and blue flesh to the bone.

Day after day that picture turned up briefly and sickeningly in Ron Brix's moments of consciousness, to be swept away again by fever attacks and jumbled together with wild dreams.

There were other pictures; nights when fires leaped up redly into the night, and grim-jawed men moved about them like the ghosts of the damned in the bowels of hell. Then there was the dirty, black-smudged dawn when men climbed into the wagon and lifted out the woman who had died beside Ron Brix. Their words: "This feller won't be long behind her."

But Ron Brix battled with a desperate fury against the death hovering under that wretched, patched bit of canvas. He had to live—he was going to live!

Awakening from some twisted dream, his throat rasped from screaming, Ron Brix would tell himself that. Sometimes he half recognized the face bending over him—the face with the large brown eyes, framed by thick brown hair with a touch of red in it, which seemed to float just out of his reach. He associated that face with what little tenderness he received—the cool cloths on his burning forehead, the water he gulped down thirstily. Sometimes he whispered to that face of love; sometimes he raved at it. . . .

Bleak days merged with freezing nights. Ron Brix remembered passing through Mormon camps. At burned-over Garden Grove and at Mount Pisgah he tried to get up and out of the wagon, but when he was conscious he was too weak to move. He remembered the tents on the hills at Council Bluffs, and then, at last, the swirling, angry waters of the Missouri as they crossed it on Mormon-made ferry-boats.

Those memories flashed through his mind as they lifted him down from the wagon. He had made it. This was Winter Quarters, the jumping-off place on the border of the wilderness.

He listened to his own shallow breathing as they laid him out on a bunk in a mud-and-pole cabin, wondering if he would ever get up on his feet again. He had never felt so weak. He closed his eyes and let himself drift. . . .

THERE was no longer that whirling confusion in his head when he awoke. His brain was very clear now, and the things he looked at weren't swollen or distorted.

Judy Harper was in the cabin. He had never really seen her before; and now, watching her, he felt ashamed and embarrassed as if he were doing something he shouldn't. She saw him and came over to the bunk and stood looking down, a puzzled expression in her eyes.

Ron whispered huskily, "How long have I been here?"

"Two weeks. You're going to be all right. Go back to sleep now."

He tried to lift his hand in a negative gesture, but he couldn't lift it, so he went to sleep. There were more days when he awoke, and Judy Harper fed him or bathed him or rearranged his blankets to make him more comfortable. They talked very little. Ron was afraid to, and the girl seemed to avoid it. And always there was that strange, uncertain look in her eyes that he didn't understand.

Lying there, waiting for the slow return of his strength, Ron learned that old Eben Harper was a man of importance among the Mormons—a member of the Council of Twelve. During most of the day and a good deal of the night men trooped into the cabin to confer with Harper.

Unable to help himself, Ron Brix listened. He heard retold the horrors he had witnessed on the march from Poor Camp to Winter Quarters. He heard the plans for the future, and he could not understand why the hardships already endured had not throttled any desire to go on. For they were going on. There was this man Brigham Young, whom they all believed in. Brigham Young had promised to lead them to a new land in the west. It might be in the Rockies, it might be Vancouver's Island in the far Northwest, it might be California; no one knew.

Yet trust and a longing for peace were going to take them there. Ron Brix, weak and silent, couldn't mistake the resolve, the patience, the indifference to peril, the stubborn determination he saw in Eben Harper and the men who came to talk with him. They were going on.

In the spring a pioneer band was to be formed. The band was to explore the mountains, find a place to settle, and send back for the main body of Mormons.

Eben Harper, it seemed, was doing a hundred things—directing the building of wagons, overseeing the distribution of food, arranging for the planting of crops, imbuing others with his confidence, his unshakable purpose. It couldn't help but touch Ron Brix; the fervor of the old man's zeal was too strong, too honest, to be avoided.

Lying on his back day after day, with nothing to do but think, Ron Brix tried to reconcile this new view of the Mormons with what he had been taught to believe. It wasn't what he wanted to believe, yet there was no denying it. Scoundrels, rascals or horse-thieves didn't lay plans to trek recklessly into a perilous, uninhabited country. Counterfeiters didn't risk their lives to reach a mountain-bound territory, a thousand miles from nowhere. That took a stout heart, honesty and courage. Someone had lied, for these men had all those things—had them in abundance.

Nor was that the only problem which troubled Ron Brix. A conviction was gnawing at him—a conviction he fought as long as he could, and then gave in to. He loved Judy Harper. He had grown hungry for glimpses of her. The touch of her slim hand on his forehead sent a

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trembling shock through him. Because of his murdered father, he struggled to maintain his hatred for Mormons—and found he couldn't. It was treachery, he thought grimly, but treachery he couldn't cast out of his mind.

As the weeks went by, there was still that remote, puzzled look in Judy Harper's brown eyes. When he tried to talk to her, she put him off. He wasn't strong enough yet to talk. Helpless, Ron Brix had to wait. And slowly the strength he needed began to return.

It was in December that he walked first. He tried it when no one else was in the cabin, tottering around the bunk by holding on to it. After that he worked at it a little each day.

He needed that strength sooner than he thought he would. Dozing late one morning, the sound of voices stirred him into wakefulness. He opened his eyes in time to see a lean, wiry figure go out of the door with Eben Harper. The slanting view he got of a dark, hawkish face made his blood pound.

Judy Harper was putting wood into the stove. Ron called to her huskily, and she came over to the bunk.

He said bluntly, "Who was that—there with Eben?"

Lines pressed themselves faintly into the smoothness of her forehead. "A man named Sawtrey," she told him. "Link Sawtrey. He's arranging for guides, for the trip."

CHAPTER FOUR

Wilderness Outcast

THAT turned up a fury of speculation in Ron Brix's head, but for the moment the nearness of this girl he loved overbalanced it. He reached out and took her wrist, and when she tried to pull away he was strong enough to hold her.

He stared at her, fumbling for words. She stood quite passively, though a flush had spread into her cheeks. In the gray morning light her hair was more a deep brown than auburn; it lay, finely-spun and rich, against her white forehead and about her ears, soft and alluring. Her brown eyes were aglow, but he could see the deep trouble in them. It was almost as if she were struggling against something which was close to overpowering her.

"You've got to talk to me, now," he demanded hoarsely.

She whispered, "There's—nothing to talk about."

"I reckon there is. I been lyin' here, Judy, till I'm half crazy with it. I've got to tell you. I can't keep it back any longer."

Desperately she whispered, "No, Ron. Don't say it."

"I've got to, I tell you," he repeated. "I love you, Judy. I'd be a dead man now, if it hadn't been for you. I don't know when it started. When you were bringin' me along from the Mississippi, maybe. I can remember you bendin' over me, an' the way your hair looked, an' the soft way your hands would touch me. An' all the time lyin' here it's been torture, just watchin' you."

He stopped, and she didn't answer. He could see the hurt deep in her eyes. That sense of struggle, of denial, was strong and clearly written. Her eyes were wet, glistening.

Ron said huskily, "Maybe if you hadn't cared—you wouldn't have done all you have for me. Nothin's ever meant half to me what you do. I got to know, Judy, if I'm right or if I'm wrong."

Her lips were trembling a little, but she said, "What you want—can't ever be. Let me go now, please."

Her voice held a warmth that was torment, and Ron Brix clung to her wrist. Had she tried, perhaps, she might have released herself, but she didn't try.

"We got a bad start," he persisted, "comin' across the river, an' then in that camp. Is it on account of that?"

"No," she said in a low tone, keeping her eyes from his.

"Maybe I said somethin' while I was sick, out of my head. I was ravin', part of the time. I remember sayin' things—"

She was looking at him queerly. "You told me about your father and—the man with—"

Ron Brix's square face was grim. "The man with bloody eyes," he finished when she didn't go on. "That was the only thing he told me before he died—that a man with bloody eyes had killed him. It didn't give me much to go on. It wasn't till afterwards I found out that the murderer was a Mormon."

Judy Harper cried quickly, "You can't be sure of that."

"I am. Dead sure. I'll show you."

His clothes were hanging on a nail over the bunk. Ron Brix took his hand from the girl's wrist, pulled them down. From a hip pocket of the homespun trousers he drew out the folded, blood-smeared page and handed it to Judy Harper.

"Look at it," he directed tightly. "The man who shot dad left it there by accident. Anybody who'd have the *Book of Mormon* with him—"

Judy took it, scanned it hastily. There had been a haunted look on her flushed face when she took it. That faded out, and when her head lifted she was angry.

"This isn't the real *Book of Mormon!*"

Ron Brix stared. "It's got to be," he blurted. "There's talk like the Bible in it, an' up at the top it says—"

"But it isn't! The real *Book of Mormon* is just history. This is from a version gotten out by people who hated the Mormons and wanted to drive them away. It's full of lies and hateful things about us. No Mormon would carry it!"

Stunned, Ron Brix searched the girl's face. Was she saying this to trick him? Her anger was plain enough, yet if what she said were true, everything he had built up was crashing about his ears. The slender thread by which he might trace the murderer of Jonathan would be snapped.

But if it were true, then Link Sawtrey had lied to him. Link Sawtrey wouldn't have made that mistake, because he knew about those things.

GRAY smoke filmed across Ron Brix's eyes. "How long has Sawtrey been here at Winter Quarters?"

"A little over two weeks."

"Been helpin' you out, has he, an' plans to go along West with you?"

"That's what he told father."

Ron snapped. "I'm gettin' up. I got to see him."

There was a swift, desperate note in Judy Harper's voice. "You can't. You—you can't go outside."

"I reckon I can." He pulled the trousers under his blanket and began to put them on. "You don't know about it, but I been walkin' around here. Got my legs steady."

"I don't mean that. It—it wouldn't be safe for you to go out, right now."

Something in the urgency of her tone made him stop, stare at her. "I don't get you."

The girl was standing very straight, and her face was colorless. "You don't know everything that's happened here. You've got to remember what the Mormons have been through already. And they aren't through it yet. They know that. There are men who want to stop the Mormons, even now; keep them from going on. They want to see the Mormons broken up and scattered, so they can plunder them more than they already have."

Ron said slowly, "I don't see where I fit into that."

"My father," Judy Harper told him in

a low voice, "is the only man in Winter Quarters who doesn't believe that's what you came across the Mississippi to do."

"They're crazy!" Ron Brix burst out.

"They don't think so. A lot of people heard the things you said that morning back at Poor Camp when you had the fever. They heard you screaming when you were out of your head in the wagon. They've been warned since that you led a gang attacking Mormon farms and settlements outside Nauvoo."

"That's a lie, Judy! You've got to believe—"

She was saying steadily, "You never explained what you happened to be doing at our farm—with those others."

"Judy," he said thickly, "that was right after I'd learned about my dad. I didn't know what it'd be like. I didn't know it'd be—what it was. Judy, you believe me, don't you?"

Ron Brix read then the reason for the hurt puzzlement deep in her eyes. It was doubt—doubt of him. And the chain of circumstances was such that she could believe nothing else.

She didn't look at him. Her glance fell away, and she murmured, "It would be better—if you didn't go out."

Storming anger took hold of him then—anger at Link Sawtrey's deception and at his present helplessness. Neither Judy nor her father had recognized Sawtrey back at the farmhouse. It had been too dark for that. If they had, Sawtrey wouldn't have been with them now. And Ron was glad that Sawtrey would be left for him to deal with alone.

He swung out of bed, fumbled for his boots and stood up, swaying a little. His big, muscle-sheathed body was gaunted from long illness. A black beard matching his hair had sprung out on his cheeks and jaws. His gray eyes were deep and burning in their sockets.

"Damn 'em!" he shouted. "Let 'em think what they want to. I'll go outside, an' there'll nobody stop me!" He stamped to the door. Opening it, he turned back to Judy Harper. "I'm talkin' to Link Sawtrey if it's the last thing I do. Where can I find him? Where's he stayin'?"

The girl hadn't moved, and she didn't answer.

"Tell me where," he insisted, "or I'll pull this place apart lookin' for him!"

Judy Harper told him then, and he went outside.

The air was keenly cold; it bit through his shirt, but he sensed the chill only dimly.

He began to walk. His glance flung, roving for the cabin he wanted.

This was the first sane glimpse he had had of Winter Quarters. It was a town of mud and log huts thatched with turf and willows or straw and dirt. On the side hills were a few makeshift dugouts. There was activity in the neat, orderly streets; men were hurrying purposefully. Ron heard the ring of a blacksmith's hammer, and the sounds of lustily plied hammer and saw.

Lips set grimly, Ron Brix shook off his weakness. Men were stopping to stare after him, but he went on, paying no attention. The harsh mutter of voices surged up in his wake, grew louder. Judy Harper had been right, then.

They were gathering behind him, calling out in voices held intentionally low. He didn't look back. To hell with them!

He got to the cabin he was looking for—a corner of the sod roof had caved in and been patched with branches and big cottonwood leaves. The door was a double layer of poles stuffed with straw. He pushed at it, stepped inside, and slammed it behind him.

A man lying on the bunk in the far corner straightened from the waist. He wore a coat, but under it his shoulders and torso looked sinewy. His hair was long, his face naturally dark and hawk-like.

LINK SAWTREY stared for a moment, peering through black beard and uncut hair, beneath Ron's square, gaunt features. Then he blurted, "Why—why, howdy, kid. Damned if I recognized you, right at first. Heard you was here."

Ron Brix leaned against the door frame, trying to save his strength. He looked carefully at Link Sawtrey's eyes. The irises were dark, almost black. The whites were a dead white.

Sawtrey swung up from the bunk. "I been meanin' to look you up, kid. There's a proposition here I can use help with. There's money in it, kid—"

"To hell with that, Link. I want to find out about that sheet with the blood on it—out of the *Book of Mormon,* you said."

Sawtrey ran a tongue over thin lips. "Sure, that's what it was."

"You know damned well it wasn't! And you knew it then! I want to know why you lied to me about that."

"Easy, kid," Sawtrey warned, eyes narrowing. "Go easy on the hard names."

"She goes as she lays, Link. There's somethin' damned funny about that. I aim to find out what."

Sawtrey shrugged. "Have it your way, kid. We wanted you to come along. We figured you were the only one could get close enough to put a slug in the old gent."

"Tricking me," Ron rasped, "into doin' your dirty killin' for you."

A flush turned Link Sawtrey's thin face darker. "I told you once, kid—"

"An' I reckon your proposition here is more of the same dirty business! You're aimin' to stop these folks if you can, an' scatter 'em, an' then go on with the same kind of night-ridin' deviltry you had a hand in east of the Mississippi. That's the job you want help with!"

"Shut your face, kid," snarled Sawtrey.

But Ron Brix rushed on in a pent-up rage. "Who was it told these folks I'd led a gang back there in Illinois? You, by God! So you could sneak in here an' get 'em to trust you, fixin' it so's they'd walk into a trap that'd smash 'em! Well. I'll spike that game for you!"

Link Sawtrey leaned forward in a crouch, glaring.

Ron snapped, "I'll tell 'em what kind of an outfit you were headin', back there. That page with the blood on it was a page out of a book you was carryin'. That's tip-off plenty as to what your game was. You'll never stop this outfit, Link! They'll run you out of here. They'll—"

He stopped, abruptly. Link Sawtrey had taken two steps toward him, coming

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like a cat. Something in Ron Brix's staring, incredulous expression halted him in his tracks.

There was an instant of utter quiet in the cabin. Dimly, in the back of his head, Ron Brix could hear the stamp of boots outside, the rolling mutter of harsh voices. He heard that vaguely, then lost the sound of it. He was staring with all his concentration into Link Sawtrey's eyes.

Fury was boiling behind those pupils. That tension, that emotional strain, had shot blood through the whites. They were unnatural, swollen—crimson. It was as if little rivulets of blood were oozing out from under the lids.

The first shock of it drained out of Ron Brix's system, leaving him almost icily cold. He was sure, absolutely sure! There was this little log-and-mud room of a cabin, and he was in it and Link Sawtrey was in it. Sawtrey—who had murdered Jonathan Brix for the money old Brix was carrying to La Harpe!

"I never knew," he said very quietly, "what dad meant when he said that a man with bloody eyes shot him. When you're in a tight, Link, your eyes look bloody. And I'm payin' off for that killin'!"

He pushed away from the door frame with his shoulders. He knew he was a fool as he did it, for he could barely stand up. And suddenly Link Sawtrey was coming at him with the lithe power and drive of a battering ram.

RON tried to dodge but was too slow; he only partially evaded the charge. Sawtrey's shoulder hit him, spun him away. He jerked free of Sawtrey's grappling hands, got in two chopping blows. Sawtrey whirled and was on him again, slugging savagely at his belly. He could see Sawtrey's strained, twisted face, the lips drawn away from his teeth, the eyes livid.

Ron took the battering, trying to keep in close. He tried to smash his fists into that twisted face, sobbing at his own helplessness and lack of strength.

Sawtrey's snarling words raked against him: "You'll do no talkin' where you're goin', kid!"

A dynamited fist smashed into Ron's mouth; he reeled back on his heels, slammed against the table and hung there, panting.

Sawtrey came running at him. Sawtrey wasn't going to hit this time. His fists weren't clenched; his fingers were curved. It was a death grip he wanted. Ron Brix, his head spinning, with no strength to match the raging desire in Sawtrey, saw and understood.

His groping hands blundered against a chair of split poles bound together with rawhide. With the last of his energy he gripped it, swung it over his head.

Link Sawtrey saw it swinging and dodged, but where planks would have given him firm footing, the dirt and rubble flooring did not. As he dodged he slipped and went off balance.

He rolled away with the lithe speed of a cat. With death staring him in the face, Ron Brix lurched after Sawtrey, aiming a finishing blow with the chair. He was reeling, half out on his feet, but he knew this chance was his last.

Sawtrey scrambled away, terror in his bloodshot eyes. He got halfway to his feet, and with Ron slashing at him with the chair legs, Sawtrey lunged for the door. He jerked it open, slithered out.

A roar of sound burst into the cabin, a sound that had been echoing dimly in the back of Ron Brix's mind. Too weak to make even a move at following, Ron suddenly stared out into a sea of grimly angry faces confronting him.

CHAPTER FIVE

Two Against the Mob

RON BRIX started to fall, caught himself against the frame of the opened door and clung there. The burst of ener-

gy he had summoned was gone. The sea of faces out there was spinning crazily. He tried to single out Link Sawtrey in the crowd, but Sawtrey was gone. He opened his mouth to shout to them to stop Sawtrey, but no words would come.

He was sick again, he thought, as sick as he had been before with the fever, but he hung desperately to the upright pole. He had to tell sombody. He had to get them to stop Link Sawtrey. Sawtrey was getting away.

But they were shouting things at him, all shouting at once. Couldn't they understand he was trying to tell them something important? He fought to gather strength enough to frame words, but breathing was terrific labor.

A great red-bearded man surged out from the crowd that blocked the street to the farther buildings.

"Yes, it's him!" he roared. "The coyote's come out of his hole!"

Like rifle shots out of a pistol fusillade, Ron Brix picked stray shouts out of the seething confusion. "A job of hot pitch with a dose of feathers thrown in will keep him from shiverin'!"

"Pitch, nothin'! Give him a taste of rope!"

"No! No! We're not murderers. But out of here he goes! He's robbed his last Mormon!"

The front rank of the crowd swept around Ron, swept him away from the door.

Brawny hands caught him roughly by the shoulders, but he was too far gone to feel any pain.

A voice in his brain was screaming that if he let them take him away now he would never live to find Link Sawtrey again. Beneath his sickness and his dizziness that voice was screaming that he must explain; if they wouldn't listen he must fight his way into the clear. But he couldn't. The faces around him were a blur. If they hadn't been shouldering him so roughly, holding him up, he would have fallen.

Then, suddenly, they stopped moving with him. The yelling was dying out. The crowd had halted and was shuffling uncertainly in the cold street.

Ron Brix strained to clear his vision. The crowd was splitting, and Ron dimly made out a girl running toward them, brushing between men who moved out of the way for her. In a moment of clarity he glimpsed her face, white and frightened, and her auburn hair, loose from its confining band and floating down to her shoulders.

Judy Harper whirled as she reached him, shielding him from the crowd. She cried out sharply, "You can't do this! We aren't killers. He'll die if you touch him now!"

The red-bearded leader answered her, his voice scornful. "We weren't goin' to kill him. We'd just give him a lesson to carry back to his friends!"

"He isn't an enemy of ours," she lashed back desperately.

"I reckon we know different, ma'am. We know the kind of devil's work he did back in Illinois, an' why he's here. His kind are rotten to the heart. Leave him here in Winter Quarters, an' the poison in him'll spread through the whole camp."

"I tell you you're wrong! He's not what you think."

"Ma'am, you're a lady, an'—"

"I'm a Mormon!" Judy Harper flung out. "You know me and you know my father. We guarantee this man!"

There was quiet through the street, and then Red-beard said sternly, "If you want this man so bad, you can have him. But mark you, he'll be yours an' no one else's in this camp or any other Mormon camp."

In Ron Brix's ears there was a dim, receding bluster of talk. The darkness which had been sweeping at him in waves now plunged wholly over him. He sensed that hands were supporting him; then he knew nothing more. . . .

HIS senses returned slowly, as if he were snatching them bit by bit. The bunk and the blankets were familiar. It was dusk in the cabin, and the room was filled heavily with shadows. One of them moved, and as he studied it that shadow, too, grew familiar.

"Judy," he whispered. "Judy, come here."

She came slowly, reluctantly. He couldn't see her face as she stood there, but from the sound of her breathing he knew that she was sobbing.

"I reckon," he said huskily, "when you kept 'em from throwin' me out this mornin' I got the answer I wanted."

Quick, bitter pride was in her voice. "That was no answer! I hate you and everything you stand for! I always will! I helped you because they might have killed you. I would have done the same for a hurt dog."

Bitter himself, Ron Brix croaked, "Those were your peace-lovin' Mormons!"

"Do you blame them? After what they've been through?"

"Judy, listen to me—"

But she turned wordlessly and ran out of the cabin.

Ron Brix could only lie there, cursing helplessly. Then gradually, he came to an understanding of the girl's actions. She loved him; the urgency and the strength of her plea for him there in the street could have meant nothing else. Yet that admission had shamed her, for she loved a man trusted by no one else in the Mormon camp. She herself, probably, did not yet trust him wholly. And now, because she had been shamed, Judy Harper hated him. . . .

It was the next day that old Eben Harper came to him. And again his bent shoulders and tired eyes reminded Ron Brix of Jonathan.

"Son," Eben said gently, "that was a bad piece of luck yesterday. I'd hoped to get that straightened out before you got on your feet. Sometimes, though, the Lord's way is a queer way; we don't always see the why of a thing. I'm hopin' now you won't quit."

Ron Brix's voice was a whisper. "I can't quit now."

"That's a thing I'm mighty glad to hear. I'm goin' with the first of 'em. I wanted you with me."

The old man pulled up a chair and sat down. The white in his beard had spread out during these early months of the winter so that now there were only flecks of dark in it.

"Remember that day when you came ridin' up?" he asked. "I kind of figured what you'd come for—I'd been expectin' it—but you were just a boy, and I liked the look of you. Judy now—Judy's all I have. But she's a girl, and I'd wanted a son. When you came ridin' up that day, I looked in your face and I didn't see any bad in it. If I'd had a boy, I'd have wanted his face to look like yours."

Something about the old man's gentleness brought Ron Brix the words he needed. He told him about Jonathan and the way he had died, and about Link Sawtrey and the raid, and the scrap of bloodstained paper, and then at last about the scene with Link Sawtrey in the cabin here in Winter Quarters.

Eben Harper listened patiently through it and at last he nodded his grey head slowly.

"Things happen like that," he said. "A man's life gets twisted, and the way he gets the kinks out shows what kind of a man he is. Maybe you're through with your kinks, son; maybe you're not. Anyhow, I'm glad you'll be goin' with us. I'll fix it for you to travel with the wagons in the spring."

Ron Brix wondered, after he had left, if the old man had meant more than he had said. Maybe old Eben Harper knew why, really, he was going on into the West.

Ron had felt at first only consuming disappointment at having let Link Sawtrey slip away from him. For Sawtrey was gone from Winter Quarters—Ron had asked about that with grim eagerness. It was certain that Sawtrey wouldn't return and give up his quest. He had been willing to do murder to carry out his scheme to stop the Mormon trek. He might alter that plan, but he wouldn't give it up, nor would he risk a return to Winter Quarters. He would aim his new attack, most probably, at the pioneer band. Let that project be wrecked, and in its ruins would perish the hope and spirit of the Mormons.

Somewhere along the Mormon trail into the West Link Sawtrey would be waiting. And there Ron Brix would meet him. . . .

FOR another month Ron Brix held to his bed. This time his strength returned more quickly. When he was on his feet again the weeks rolled by with a swiftness that astonished him. Winter Quarters was humming with activity. Carpenters were sawing tree trunks into planks for the wagons. Forge-fires roared as blacksmiths hammered out new wagon tires, plowshares, nails. Green timber was boiled in salt water for spokes and felloes. Women were busy weaving homespun cloth for their men, knitting, making leggings from deer and elk skins, fashioning willow baskets for market.

In spite of himself, the eagerness and hope of that company which had endured so much got into Ron Brix's blood. For the first time he saw Brigham Young—a compact, well-knit man of medium height, massive of forehead, thin-lipped, with gray eyes that conveyed a sense of striking power.

Watching him, Ron Brix could understand the tremendous influence he held over this oppressed people. He was quiet, imperturbable, utterly sure of himself. They would have followed him into a grave. But he promised no graves. He promised a new land, a land of freedom, somewhere along the wilderness trail ahead.

It was in April that the boiling excitement of preparation reached its height—and they were ready. The moment was a tense one, for no one doubted that on the success or failure of the pioneer band hinged the fate of the Mormons. Where the long trek would end, no one knew. Brigham Young said only, "I will know the place when I see it." And they believed him.

On the fourteenth of April, seventy-three wagons rolled westward from the Elkhorn rendezvous beyond Winter Quarters. In that party seeking a haven for the thousands behind them were one hundred forty men and three women. Judy Harper rode beside her father, pride holding her head high, pride holding the smile to her lips when there was no smile in her heart. Ron Brix strode ahead on foot, the strength of his youth in him again, but his grey eyes hard, his square face lined and grim.

No one wanted him here; that had been made plain enough. He swore to himself that he didn't care—but he did. The youngness in his life was fading. He was building a makeshift existence around the bitter core of his hatred for Link Sawtrey, his desire for vengeance.

It was a noble company—a desperate and a pitiful one—that pioneer band of men and women plodding toward the west, to face they knew not what.

CHAPTER SIX

Bushwhackers!

AT THE rate of twenty miles a day the wagon train gnawed its way into the treeless plain. Along the Platte River, up the North Fork, and a rough five hundred miles of monotonous rolling over

barren prairie. The Loup was crossed in a specially constructed leathern boat. As they forged into Indian country pistols and muzzle-loading rifles were passed out to every man.

Discipline was strict; vigilance complete. At night the wagons were drawn into a semicircle on the river bank, tongues pointing out, the fore wheel of one against the hind wheel of the next. A bugle call waked the train at five. Prayers were said, breakfast eaten, and a bugle call again at seven sent the wheels to rolling once more.

Grim stubbornness was evident in those who gathered around the fires at the night camps; a hardy, unswervable determination.

Sitting alone, shunned and ignored, Ron Brix wondered about that. Now the wagon train feared only natural perils. Yet as the days drifted by, Ron's conviction that they would meet Link Sawtrey grew more sturdy. It lay in his mind steadily, implacably. He had come here to kill Link Sawtrey. That was the one thing left for him to do.

His love for Judy Harper was a torment he fought to suppress. Her broken pride had opened a gulf between them too wide to be spanned. Each day of silence increased the breach. He had given up hope of healing the wound.

Yet in spite of himself his eyes sought her out hungrily. She had been hurt and was as lonely as he. Because she was Eben Harper's daughter she was granted the respect of the train, but little friendliness was added to it. Ron Brix knew that he had caused that.

Sometimes at night she talked with her father. Sometimes in the soft dusk she walked by herself to the outskirts of the camp or along the whispering river. If there was danger in that she was heedless of it. And sometimes, unable to endure his apprehension, avid for even a torturing glimpse of her, Ron Brix followed her at a distance. Soon enough he would lose even that little bitter comfort. For he had made up his mind that if he met Link Sawtrey and lived, he was going back. . . .

It was at Fort Laramie, on the Platte's North Fork, that Ron Brix got his first word of Sawtrey. The train camped nearby. Eben Harper and two others of the Council rode to the fort. When they returned Harper singled out Ron and sat with him at the rim of the fire's flickering circle of light.

It was a long time before he spoke. He polished methodically at his square-cornered spectacles which the flames coated with a crimson sheen.

He said at last, "You were right, son. Sawtrey's been here."

Sitting hunched with his arms about his knees, Ron Brix didn't move. He asked, "How long ago?"

"He's been in and out of the place. Came here, near as I can make out, right after he left Winter Quarters. If he wasn't bad before, he's turned bad since."

"He ain't dead?"

"No. Maybe it'd be better if he was. He hooked up with a couple of renegade half-breeds. On his way out here he got mixed up in a deal to bring in rotgut liquor. He's been stirrin' up the Injuns. He was drunk most of the time he was here, an' he made his talk about gettin' together an Injun army big enough to wipe out the Mormons when they came through."

Ron said grimly, "Whiskey talk. He'll make trouble, but he can't do that much."

Eben Harper got to his feet heavily. "Maybe not. A warning ought to be plenty. You've given us that."

THE wagon train pulled away in the morning, and west of the fort, in the mountains, made camp for a longer stay. Laramie was a week behind them, and ferries had to be built for another river crossing. Horses and mules were badly in need of rest, and a supply of meat for

the rest of the journey was needed.

Scouts brought in reports that no hostile Indian sign had been crossed. If there had been doubts, those doubts were lulled. Perhaps Ron Brix was the only man whose suspicions remained unimpaired. Sooner or later, he knew, the break would come. He was waiting for it.

But the break came so mildly that he didn't know it had come until it was too late. A fire leaped and roared by the circle of wagons, picking a little spot of light out of the forested slopes of the rimming hills.

From the corner of his eye Ron saw Judy Harper, alone as he was. He didn't dare to look too steadily at her. In the dusk and the flare of the fire, her dress was a warm splash of light color.

The dusk had deepened almost into night when he looked up again. He missed the splash of color. Turning his head to look directly at her then, he saw that Judy Harper was gone, and he swung to his feet, catching up the rifle between his knees. Farther off in the darkness he thought he saw a twinkle of light cloth. She had gone for one of her walks, probably. He sidled after her, treading lightly.

A few of the saddle horses were picketed in a rope corral a little distance from the wagons. On speculation, Ron Brix swung past them. Judy Harper's favorite dun pony was missing.

Ron swore under his breath. The girl was a fool. Hastily he flung up the first saddle that came to his hand, cinched it down and mounted.

A valley and a half-broken trail led south from the encampment. He turned his horse into it, a tightness rising in his throat. He covered five hundred yards at a gallop, then stopped to listen. The mountains around him were still and black against the dark night sky. Wind rustled through pine branches in a mocking whisper.

Then faintly to his straining ears came another sound. It might have been one of a dozen forest noises—and it might have been the frightened cry of a woman, choked off before it was fully uttered. He whirled toward it, and was aware then that a running horse was coming up fast behind him.

Pulling around, he saw the dim outline of the rider coming at him. That would be Judy, he thought, and he'd send her back. The rider was full on him before he recognized that the figure in the saddle was too large to be the girl's.

The horse brushed up against his; the rider leaned toward him and the hard circle of a pistol muzzle was pressed into his ribs.

"All right, Brix," a voice rasped at him. "Far enough."

"Who is it?" he snapped.

"Brucker. I been watchin' you, mister, figurin' you'd try to pull a fancy one. Like to put us in a hole, wouldn't you?

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What's your game? Who you meetin' here, an' what for?"

Ron swore. Earl Brucker was the red-bearded Mormon who had held him by the shoulders in the street at Winter Quarters. "You damned idiot," he cried, "put your gun away. Judy Harper rode this way. I heard her scream up yonder a minute ago. Something's happened."

"Hogwash," Brucker growled. "Hold steady or I'll put a slug through you. You're ridin' back to camp with me. Now."

Seconds were going fast. Sure now that it was Judy's voice he had heard, savagely torn by the implications of it, Ron felt hot wrath boil into his head.

He jerked recklessly away from Brucker's pistol and yelled, "Damn your Mormon guts! She's up there, I tell you! I'm goin' after her if I have to kill you to do it! Put that gun down an' get the hell out of my way!"

Brucker slipped the pistol back into his waistband. "You win, Brix. I had to make sure. Come along."

Ron scarcely heard him. He had sent his horse plunging past Brucker and on up the trail. Brucker clattered behind him, calling, "Easy, man—this trail's hell. You'll be no use to her dead!"

It was, actually, next to no trail at all. A rocky slope, twisting in and out of the shrouding timber, it bent around gorge heads, wound precariously upward. With his heart storming in his chest, Ron Brix sent his mount hammering at it. The night held close and black around him, an impenetrable and treacherous blanket.

Behind him was the scrape and rattle of hoofs, and the anguished sound of Brucker's voice, pleading for caution.

THERE was reason for that. One instant low-hanging branches were lashing Ron Brix's face. The next there was none; the muscles of his horse were bunching in a frenzied, panic-stricken effort.

And the meaning of that registered on Ron's mind in a stabbing flash. Then he was flinging himself to the left, out of the saddle, as the pony's withers dropped out from under him.

His clawing fingers caught around roots and a small pyramid of rock, while he clung there with the pony's terrified scream ringing through his brain. It seemed long minutes before he heard the sickening thud as the horse struck far below him.

Then there was Brucker's voice, gasping, "Brix! For God's sake, Brix, where are you?"

"Give me a hand up," he answered, gasping. "I'm all right."

Brucker hauled him back, said shakily, "You crazy, Brix? If Judy's up here—"

"She didn't come of her own accord, damn it! Someone's got her!"

"Who?"

Ron, staring up into the blackness ahead, didn't reply.

Brucker snapped, "Whoever it is, it's a cinch he can't make any better time than we can. There was a moon last night. It'll be up again pretty quick now, an' we can get on with it."

"We'll go ahead anyhow, as fast as we can."

Brucker said, "Sure," and then his voice stopped. When he spoke again there was a sneering quality in it. "Oh. I'm gettin' the hang of it now. Harper told me about you an' Sawtrey. You figure it's Sawtrey we're after. Judy don't matter; she could be up here dead an' you wouldn't bat an eye. But you're willin' to risk your rotten neck to get Sawtrey!"

Ron answered bitterly, "I'm goin' on. Come along or stay behind. I don't give a damn which."

He turned, skirting the drop, and began to follow the meager trail at a half run, carrying his rifle across his face to ward off brush from his eyes.

Presently there was a luminous glow

above the serrated rim, and the yellow globe of the full moon pushed itself away from the last peak to float in a clear, dark sky. Now they had light to see by.

The valley was tapering, and the trail crawled up along the left side of it. No other route, apparently, could have been followed. To the west lifted rocky slopes studded with wind-tortured pines; to the east a winding, sheer-sided ravine slit the valley's gut.

For better than an hour Ron Brix trotted in the lead. While there was light enough to see, there was no light for studying sign, and he wasted no time at it, confident that no other way was possible, while Earl Brucker rode after him, silent and contemptuously wrathful.

After an hour or so, Brucker grunted out a warning. Ron had seen enough for himself to know what they were running into. Yonder where the trees stood like black, swaying ghosts the valley broadened into a little park. At its further end rock ledges strewn with pines rose in tiers to a lesser summit. The ravine petered out to a sheer, deep crevice at its lower end.

If they were to be ambushed this was the place for it. Ron hesitated only an instant. No artifice would carry them across that park. It must be a rush or nothing. He broke into a run, zigzagging as he went. He didn't look behind, or care what Brucker was doing, but he heard the drum of hoofs come up behind him.

The horse passed him. Brucker was leaning low in the saddle, his pistol out, and Ron Brix had time for the flashing judgment that the Mormon didn't lack courage. A hundred yards they covered; then two hundred. Brucker was within fifty feet of the lowest rock shelf.

Clear and sharp, through the singing of the wind in the trees, came the burst of a rifle shot. As if it had tripped on an invisible wire, Brucker's pony spilled over in a somersault. Brucker pitched clear and rolled with the looseness of a man half stunned.

RON BRIX cursed, and with the breath sobbing in his lungs tried to run faster. Brucker was a clear target in the moonlight; another shot would finish him. Still seventy-five yards from the shelf, he saw Brucker up ahead, crawling clumsily to his hands and knees, then stagger upright. The Mormon had just gained his feet when the rifle on the shelf spat again. Ron caught another splash of flame and Brucker spun down on his face.

Brucker had been racing straightaway, but Ron, a smaller, weaving figure in the moonlight, was a vastly more uncertain target, and he knew it. His attention riveted ahead of him, he didn't see the naked form running through the trees to the western edge of the park. Nor did he hear the twang of bow-string or see the glint of moonlight on the polished arrow as it streamed toward him.

Two inches higher and the arrow would have pierced him through the neck. As it was, the flint head struck him in the right shoulder and crushed in under the collarbone. The shock of it knocked him off his feet and probably knocked him out of the way of the bullet ripping out from the shelf.

He rolled swiftly into a brushy depression, snapping off the protruding wood of the arrow as he did it. Another arrow whispered over his head. For the moment, at least, the Indian was more of a menace than the man on the shelf. Ron slung his rifle around to the west.

The Indian was no more than a shadowy silhouette against the dark forest background. Another arrow fitted, he had left the woods and was coming up like a panther. Ron got his bead, pulled the trigger carefully.

For an instant everything was blotted out by sickening pain as the rifle's stock

kicked against the buried arrowhead in his shoulder. When he could see again, the Indian was gone. There was no sound from the shelf. Crouching low, Ron reloaded. Then he went out of his brush-lined depression like a rabbit out of its hole.

The gun on the shelf stabbed flame, but the bullet missed. Ron Brix marked the spot and with his teeth set, leaped for it, twisting, sprinting, dodging.

He reached the huddled Brucker, heard him groan feebly as he passed him. Ron drew another bullet there. The slug sliced along his cheek and laid it open from cheek-bone to the turn of his jaw. The sting of it sent a hard, deadly satisfaction rushing through him. The gunman on the shelf had wasted his chance. If he were fast enough, he could reach the shelf before the gunman had time to reload.

Gasping, calling for the last of his flagging energy, he made straight for it. Blindly in the shadowed darkness he jumped for the shelf, caught it with the fingers of his left hand, found a toe-hold, and lunged over, his rifle ahead of him.

A warped pine hung low there, shadowing the spot as he scrambled to his knees. The place, it seemed, was empty; the gunman must have fled after that last shot rather than risk being caught with his rifle unloaded. Ron fought his sobbing breath, listening. Faintly he picked up the thud of a boot, the clink of shod hoof on rock.

He was up, plunging toward it, when he tripped on something soft. Kneeling in the deep shadows his hands touched a face and fine silk-like hair. It was Judy Harper, her hands and feet tied and a gag bound across her mouth. He fumbled at the knots, finally jerked them loose.

She cried out, "Ron!" and he wondered how she had known it would be he. There was a swift demand, a pleading, in her voice. "Ron, something terrible—"

But there was another thing burning implacably in his mind. He said instantly and savagely, "It was Sawtrey, wasn't it?"

"Yes, but there's something else! Ron, wait!"

He finished loosening the knots binding her ankles when a sound caught his attention. He stood up and turned away from her toward the clatter of scrambling hoofs from above. That would be Link Sawtrey, riding his own horse and leading the girl's. Link Sawtrey was getting away!

CHAPTER SEVEN

Warn the Wagons!

A MAN on foot could make better work of those tiers of rock than a horse. If he could but beat Sawtrey to the top and wait there for him—wait for the showdown that would culminate almost a year of bitterness and defeat!

He cried harshly, "This is the finish. I'll be back to pick you up."

Then Judy Harper was up too. She caught his arm with both hands. They were out from under the tree, and the moonlight flowed against her anguished white face.

"Ron, what happens to me doesn't matter. It's the wagon train!"

He had started to jerk his arm away, but something in her tone held him from it. "The wagons?" he growled. "They're safe enough."

"No! This was a trick! Don't you see? Sawtrey boasted to me about it."

He blurted, "It was trick enough to take you! But that's done with!"

"I don't mean that. It was a trick to split up the wagons. We've been too strong for him. But Sawtrey knew that when they found out I was gone they would send out searching parties. Half the men, or more, will be out combing these hills. Don't you see? Sawtrey has

his Indians ready. They're going to attack the wagons and burn them, and then ambush the searching parties. They'll wipe us out, Ron! Someone's got to warn them!"

He understood then, but he said roughly, "A few minutes won't make any difference. I'll be back in time."

"You may not come back," she said simply.

That was true enough, for there was an even chance that Sawtrey would kill him. Until now he hadn't cared about that. His desperate desire to finish up the matter of Jonathan's death had obliterated any concern for himself or for the others. If he died, he had believed that he would be well out of a life which had turned bitter and repulsive.

Yet this life he now suddenly realized was not entirely his own, to do with as he chose. It had become bound inextricably with others. He swore helplessly. The fate of all the Mormons, perhaps, rested on his shoulders. That of the pioneer band certainly did, and upon those seventy-three wagons were pinned the hopes of the thousands left behind.

Ron Brix told himself grimly that he didn't care. The Mormons hated him. They distrusted him. They had been, once, on the verge of beating him and driving him out to die. He had endured all that only to gain his chance at Link Sawtrey. And now. . . .

Try as he would, he couldn't forget what he had seen on the road from Poor Camp; he couldn't forget the courage and the hardship and the undying hope he had met with in Winter Quarters; he couldn't forget old Eben Harper, who trusted him.

If he went to the summit of these rocky tiers, and didn't come back, the girl would be left alone with a man badly wounded or dying. She would never make it back in time to warn the wagon train, if she could make it at all.

Judy Harper's voice came to him quietly. "I think we're cut off from the camp by now. Sawtrey's renegades—"

He shook his head. "It doesn't matter. I'll get through. If your folks haven't scattered yet, I'll keep 'em from it. But I'll have to leave you here with Brucker."

They left the shelf and found Brucker trying to drag himself to them. He had been shot through both legs; the bones were broken and the wounds were bleeding badly. There was a dull, relentless ache running through Ron's shoulder now, but with Judy's help he picked up Brucker and carried him to the eastern edge of the park, in a shelter under the trees. For a moment he stood watching Judy work to stop the bleeding.

"Heard you say—you were goin' down," Brucker gasped. "I got—my pistol, so we'll make out. God's luck to you—Brix."

Ron said steadily, "I'll leave my rifle, too, in case you need it. I won't have any use for it. I'd rather travel light." He didn't explain that another kick from the stock against his injured shoulder would have knocked him out.

He stripped off bullet pouch and powder horn and tossed them down. Judy Harper's white face was turned toward him, but he was trembling, and unsure of himself, and all he said was: "Stay here till an hour after dawn. If nobody's come for you by then, it won't be any use stayin' longer."

Then he turned and went off at a trot down the valley. He didn't look back.

THE moon was bright, icily cold. The wind had stopped stirring the pine branches, and there was no sound at all but the muffled pad of his footfalls.

He had a long way to go, and he held his pace down, though a devil in his brain shouted for a mad, headlong run. Every movement of his right arm sent lances of pain darting through his shoulder. He tried holding it tightly against his side

and across his chest. That helped a little, but it made running awkward.

He came to the head of the ravine and trotted out along the obscure trail which skirted it. There overhanging trees made patches of dark; roots caught at him, strove to trip him. He had been tired when he started; he stopped for a minute or two to rest, panting. In spite of the rest, when he went on, his muscles had lost their spring.

He had trouble now keeping his head from spinning. The pain and the weakness from loss of blood climbed up into his brain, throbbing there. How far had he come? Half way? It must be more than that. It seemed that he had been running for hours. His legs were leaden and awkward; he had to keep forcing them to do what he wanted.

Then at a sudden sound he stopped, fighting to quiet his hammering breath. Horses were coming up the trail, between him and the camp!

He remembered what Judy Harper had said. These were some of Sawtrey's renegades, probably, coming up to set their ambush at the valley's head.

Ron Brix worked his way to the edge of the ravine. He couldn't go back; he couldn't stay here. He stared down. The moon obscured this side; if there were footholds or ledges to aid a descent, they were invisible. Bad as the chance was, he had to take it. He swung his legs over, lowered himself with his good arm. His floundering feet found support. He clung there, fumbled for another hold, found it and lowered himself again.

Thirty feet below, his boots hit firm sand just as the scraping of unshod hoofs passed above him. He waited, counting the minutes, until the sounds had faded. Then he began to run again down the ravine.

He had taken no more than twenty steps when a cry rang against his ears. Behind him a trade gun banged, and the racket echoed and rolled between the walls. A guard left along the trail had spotted him, or one of the renegade party had turned for a final look to the rear. At any rate they were after him. There were no more yells after that first one. They were coming back, but as quietly as they could. Very faintly Ron could hear the chunk of their hoofs.

Though it was torture, he broke out of his trot. He couldn't save himself any longer. It was run or die with an arrow or a trade gun slug in his back.

He had a start of a good three hundred yards. While the Indians were mounted, the trail along the rim was highly treacherous. If they tried speed, one or more of them would go plunging over it to a mangled death. It was even, or nearly so. It would remain even as long as his legs held out.

Ron Brix lost track of how far he had come and how far he had to go. His lungs beat and thundered against his ribs, and still would not draw in enough air to satisfy his screaming muscles. He was stumbling, staggering, lurching down that black ravine, plowing through sand that sucked at his boots. His shoulder was a bloody hell of agony. His legs were lifeless stumps, thick, unwieldy things that moved though he had no power over them.

But they moved, in an insane, stumbling madman's run that kept up long after energy and strength were gone and only will remained.

Guns were crashing thunderously behind him. He considered that stupidly, still running. They had been quiet before, so as not to alarm the camp. Why were they so careless now? The reason got through his thick, hampered thoughts. He must be near the camp! The Indians were afraid he was going to make it. He'd make the camp. By God, he would make it!

Then he saw the wagons, and the men running out from them toward him. He fell, but they were helping him up.

He heard someone grunt, "Oh, hell, it's

that coyote Harper's been pamperin'. Too bad them redskins didn't get holt of him!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

Mormons' Last-Stand Fight

RON BRIX fought to force words out of his throat. He was choking and they wouldn't come. Indifferent hands carried him inside the circle of wagons. Blazing fires that rolled back the dark tossed their heat against his face.

Then kindly old eyes behind square steel-rimmed spectacles were close to him, and he recognized the full gray beard of Eben Harper. "What's the trouble, boy? Judy? I been looking for her. She's gone."

"Injuns," Ron Brix gasped out of a throat that felt as if knives were slashing it. "Sawtrey's aimin'—to hit the camp. Get 'em—ready for it!"

Eben Harper was towering over him, thundering out staccato commands. Eben Harper believed in him, and he had authority. There in the dark the Mormon camp looked weirdly unreal as it came to life. Half-clothed men spilled out of the wagons, gripping rifles.

Tortured by his wounds and by weakness, Ron Brix lay and watched it. Off somewhere in the dark a gun began to bark—a sharp, steady chain of sound. All at first appeared to be senseless confusion. Shouts lifted in a hopeless jumble; fires crackled and roared; the beating of shod hoofs surged through the camp as the horse and mule herd was driven from its grazing ground.

Eben Harper came plodding back with a bottle and tilted it to Ron's lips. The bite of it in his raw throat told him that it was whiskey. He heard old Harper muttering, "There's uses for liquor besides making a man drunk. You need it, son. Feel like you can talk now?"

Out of what seemed to be mad chaos, order came swiftly. A detachment was kicking out the fires. Others set about rapidly hobbling the horses and mules which had come streaming into the enclosure. Drilled squads of riflemen strung out under wagon boxes. In the last of the light from the dying flames a man ran across the open space crying, "There's a hull nest of 'em on the south! Get men over there!"

Squads wheeled and trotted to the southern wagon battlement. Immediately long guns began to snarl in a furious, crackling outburst. Link Sawtrey had changed his plans, Ron thought. The chance of surprise was gone; there would be no scattered searching parties to ambush. So Sawtrey was hurling his renegades at the camp, hoping to batter through it before the defenders could settle themselves.

Anger swept through Ron Brix because what he had already done was not enough. Perhaps, if he hadn't let Sawtrey slip through his fingers. . . . But he shook that notion out of his head. If he had met Sawtrey up there on the rim, and failed to hold him or kill him, the camp would have been utterly lost. He tilted up the bottle again, and the fire of the whiskey mounted through his weary muscles. There was fighting to be done, and he had to help with it.

Dawn was not far off. Now in the hovering darkness savage sound boiled up from the encampment. There was the drumming of exploding guns; men were shouting hoarsely; Indian cries shrilled through the night; smoke from the extinguished fires blended with burned powder to hang in a stifling pall among the wagons; horses were stamping, snorting, surging.

Ron Brix tried to get up. The shocking pain of that arrowhead in his shoulder made him sink back with a gasp.

Old Eben Harper was bending over him, muttering, "Judy, man! What's become of her?"

"Get a knife," Ron gritted between his teeth. "This arrow in my shoulder—get it out an' I can handle a gun."

AS THE spectacled, gray-bearded Mormon knelt over Ron, probing for the arrowhead, Ron gripped a pistol in his two hands, and fired at the leaping shadows. When the caps were exhausted, he jerked the tale of what had happened. Judy and Earl Brucker were safe enough for the moment. What became of them would depend on what happened here at the wagons.

Harper croaked, "You'd best lie quiet. You're bleedin' through the bandage, son. You'll chance bleedin' to death."

But knowledge that Judy Harper was off in the night, waiting, was a pillar of flame in Ron Brix's heart. In his feverish madness he cursed Eben Harper and crawled to his feet. The love he had denied was a ripping, slashing torment. And there was more to it than that—a queer, vague quirk in his mind that swayed him powerfully.

He had been through too much with the Mormons to quit them now, while they battled tensely, desperately for their lives. It was Jonathan Brix's dying which had brought him here. Jonathan's dying had been planned, perhaps, for this. Jonathan's death might be balanced if he helped these men and women he had cursed and maligned. It might wash from him the bitterness of his hatred for Link Sawtrey.

He struggled up and went at a staggering run for the rim of wagons, flinging himself down there. There was another gun for him, in the hands of a man who would never use it again. He had to pry away the fingers, resolute even in death.

Gray, murky light was sifting over the tree-studded hills on his left. There were targets out beyond—scudding, shrieking figures that loosed a hail of snicking arrows and musket slugs against the wagons. Ron Brix shot, reloaded and shot again. He tore away half of the dead man's coat to make a pad for his shoulder. The racket about him was a ragged, nerve-shredding blast of sound.

Someone near him was groaning, a muffled, monotonous ejaculation of pain. Mortally hit by a stray arrow, a horse in the enclosure had burst its hobbles and screamed as it made a panicky, blundering effort to escape. Powdersmoke swirled away in streamers, searing gasping lungs, fiercely stinging eyes already bloodshot and weary.

Ron Brix rubbed at them with his fist, callous to the hurt. He had to see; there were bobbing darting figures to be lined in the groove of his sights.

By his side a husky, bearded Mormon growled, "Here they come again. They quit last time."

Yes, they were coming. An uneven line, some mounted and some on foot, had sprung out of the woods. They came in a leaping, yelling charge, furious and savage. Naked, clouted demons, sprinting like deer, crouching forward like panthers. There were feathers in the twisted top-knots of some. In the surly gray of the dawn there was no burnish to the red of their muscled bodies; theirs was the dull, rusty color of metal which has lain long in the weather.

In the din and the writhing confusion they struck at the wagons curled against them, beat at them like a bloody-knuckled fist against a shuddering door. It seemed as if the wagons themselves were recoiling under the roaring impact of that charge. Ron Brix shot, saw a scar-faced warrior with the teeth of a horse spill forward and plunge head foremost into the hub of a wagon wheel. No time to reload. He was scrambling out, clubbing his rifle. This was a hand-to-hand fight now, with no quarter sought or conceded.

Ron Brix summoned the snapping threads of his energy and hurled that remnant into the battle. The butt of his

rifle splintered against bone. There was a towering, writhing wave of red bodies sweeping around him, and he slugged at it. The sturdy rifle barrel was torn from his hands, and a stunning blow battered him to his knees.

A glinting knife-blade slashed downward at him. Coming in a long dive, a warrior plunged full against Ron's body, but he had gauged the knife-hand and caught it. He rolled with the blow. It was the Indian's momentum rather than Ron Brix's strength which did it. The savage flipped on over, and the small of his back catapulted into an iron-tired wheel. He lay there, grotesquely bent.

Ron got the knife, turned back again to the scene of mad fury and death.

Swaying back into the melee, Ron Brix saw that the fight was, for the moment, deadlocked. And he saw another thing—a face he recognized behind a mask of blood and powder burns. The features were hawk-like, dark, and the eyes had an unnatural look of being bloody.

Link Sawtrey saw him at the same instant. His lips were back from his teeth, his eyes burning with the lust to kill. Perhaps it was accident, perhaps intent. Sawtrey chopped a man out of his way with a pistol barrel, and the path was clear between them.

Ron Brix struck upward with the knife as they came together. Sawtrey smashed at it with his pistol and the blade snapped off.

Then Ron went down with Sawtrey sprawling over him.

WEAKLY, Ron reached out with his hands. The fingers buried themselves in the cords and muscles of a throat, and he squeezed. Sawtrey was smashing at his face with the pistol. It was no good; his fingers weren't strong enough to stop that. His rolling head eluded one blow, eluded another; and a third glanced away from his forehead. . . .

Ringing in his ears suddenly was the sound of shots. That was queer. There hadn't been room or time for shooting for many minutes. He couldn't dodge again. He looked up into the stubbled, twisted face of Link Sawtrey, and the bloody eyes. The face had frozen, seemingly. Why didn't the man strike again?

A movement beyond Sawtrey's shoulder took away Ron Brix's half-conscious attention. He couldn't make it out at first. A dun pony was coming out of the woods; and hunched in the saddle, a rifle slanting across his chest, was a man. It was red-bearded Earl Brucker, and running in front of him was Judy Harper.

Ron Brix wanted to shout to her to stay away; she would be killed. Then he saw that the fighting was done, and that the Indians were gone.

All but Sawtrey were gone. Sawtrey was here, over him, and his fingers were propping up Sawtrey's neck. Sawtrey would strike at him, and he couldn't dodge any more.

Ron wanted to hear Judy's voice again, but he knew he wouldn't; he was going to die before she could reach him. He couldn't hold Sawtrey back any longer. His fingers were numb, trembling with weakness and he let Sawtrey's throat slide out of them.

Limp and lifeless, Link Sawtrey's body slumped down against Ron Brix's chest, rolled loosely to one side. Ron looked stupidly at Sawtrey's swollen neck and at his own fingers from which he had thought the strength was gone.

He got to his feet somehow. A man running by him yelled, "It's Brucker! Brucker an' Judy Harper!"

That wrenched Ron's thoughts back to Judy. No danger for her any more. Sawtrey's renegades were whipped and scattered, and Sawtrey was dead. Judy had seen him and was running to him, her finely-spun auburn hair was loose and flying about her face. There was fright in her brown eyes, yet they were aglow,

too. Standing there, because he knew if he moved he would fall, Ron Brix wondered what that glow meant. What was he going to say to her?

There was no need to say anything. She was here, close to him, and his arms had gone up and about her. Her face was against his, soft and warm and strengthening, and her brown eyes were deep, inviting pools. Then Ron Brix forgot the camp, this pit of hell in the mountains, and the bleak bitterness of the past. At last he found he could tell her of his love, blurting it out huskily, awkwardly.

Judy Harper was close to him, part of him, sobbing, "Oh, Ron, Ron, I've wanted—so much—to let you say that to me!"

"This is the beginning," he told her. "Everything I've wanted is in front of me now."

Eager hands were helping Earl Brucker down from the saddle he had endured so much to hold. He growled, "How'd we get here? Judy's pony got away from Sawtrey an' come back. She got me aboard an' we come on down. But that don't matter. Where's Brix? There's a man for my money, boys. Get my legs patched up, an' I'll tell you—"

It was old Eben Harper, his gray beard streaked with blood, who insisted on helping his daughter lift Ron Brix into one of the wagons. There, in the early light of a new day, he crouched on his knees like a benign patriarch.

"Maybe, son," he murmured, "there's a lot we can talk over now. Or maybe it don't need talkin' about at all."

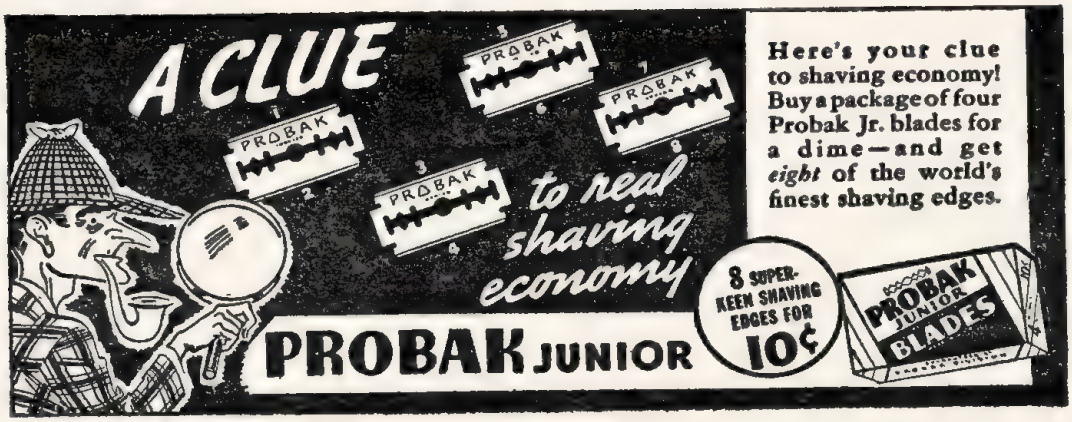
Ron shook his head. "I reckon it doesn't."

The old man's eyes were kindly, proud. "We'll be going on in a day or so. To Salt Lake, it seems like now. We've had scouts out. There's a valley there, and everything we need. There'll be a place for you, son—and we'll need you."

Judy Harper's slim, strong hand was lying in Ron's. He gripped it and looked up into her eyes and after a moment said quietly, "I won't be alone, when I get there, will I?"

Then the touch of her soft, clinging lips was a promise of a new world opening up before him. . . .

THE END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TINHORN'S DEATH-MORTGAGE

By Gunnison Steele

(Author of "The Glorious Traitor," etc.)

Like a fanged and deadly sidewinder, Buck Flame, gambler and killer, waited along the trailside to pay off Jim Tolley for ten years of prison purgatory. . . . But Buck Flame couldn't resist a gamble before final pay-off—when the stake was a ranch-girl as lovely as old Jim's daughter!

BUCK FLAME was about to kill a man, and the knowledge sent fierce triumph rioting through his wolf-lean body. It molded his hawkish features into grim, ruthless lines and made him squirm and fidget with impatience.

The blazing sun, slanting toward the west, splayed with savage heat the cliff-side where Buck Flame crouched in a shallow niche. But Buck Flame didn't

notice the heat, nor the insects that paraded over his sweaty body. Eyes and mind were concentrated wholly upon the buckboard that was coming slowly along the narrow trail a quarter-mile away. For in that buckboard was Jim Tolley, the man Buck Flame aimed to kill—the man he had lived through ten slavish, hell-spawned years to kill.

Buck Flame thought about those years now as he huddled there beside the trail with the hot rifle in his hand. He thought about those drab gray walls that had shut out sun and wind and sky; about the loneliness and silence and brain-cooking heat; and the savage beatings from man-killing guards. He remembered grimly the restless tread of feet along steaming corridors; the staring, empty eyes, and the brutish faces of men half-mad with hate and vengeance-lust.

Buck Flame reviewed those things, and fresh hate for Jim Tolley seethed in his heart. Hate, and thoughts of the time when he would kill Jim Tolley, was all that had carried Buck Flame through those years. A thousand nights, as he lay in the silence and heat, he'd thought about just how he would kill Tolley and of the fierce pleasure it would give him. When other men had screamed in the weird stillness and blackness, Buck Flame had smiled grimly; when others had gone loco and leaped upon the guards, only to be clubbed senseless, Buck Flame had kept his head. And when the chance for escape had presented itself he'd grasped greedily at it. . . .

It was hard for Buck Flame to realize that he wasn't still dreaming, that he was actually about to kill Jim Tolley. The buckboard was closer now. Now he could plainly see the figure on the spring seat—no, two figures. Buck Flame scowled. He'd counted on Jim Tolley being alone.

Then his lips tightened. That wouldn't make any difference; he'd kill Jim Tolley just the same. Buck Flame lay on a narrow rock ledge halfway up the cliffside. The wall above him was notched with shelves. His bronc was atop the canyon wall. He could kill Jim Tolley, climb up the wall and be gone before that other gent could do anything about it.

Now the buckboard was two hundred yards away—now one. . . . Buck Flame raised himself to his knees, rifle in hand, a sort of desperate intensity in his tawny eyes as he stared at the figures in the buckboard. That gent holding the reins was Jim Tolley, all right. Jim Tolley didn't look much like he had ten years ago; his hair was white, and he looked old and stooped. He didn't look husky and arrogant and confident now. But it was him. That other gent beside him. . . .

Buck Flame's lean body stiffened suddenly. The other one wasn't a gent. It was a girl. A slim, golden-haired young girl. She was looking up at Jim Tolley, and smiling at him. Resentment surged over Buck Flame. That knocked hell out of his plans. Then Buck steeled himself. Damned if it did! The girl, whoever she was, had no business being there.

Buck Flame looked again at the girl. She was pretty, pretty as hell. Jim Tolley hadn't had a wife, ten years ago. Then Buck Flame remembered. Jim Tolley's wife had died, but he'd had a daughter. A gangling, tom-boyish kid with pig-tails, then. Now Kay Tolley wasn't gangling and awkward; her slim body was softly-rounded and graceful as a young pine.

BUCK FLAME tore his eyes away from the girl, focussed them on Jim Tolley. Tolley's gaunt body presented a plain target. Slowly, Buck Flame raised the rifle, trained it on Jim Tolley's chest. Now, he told himself, he was about to collect for the ten years of hell he'd spent. He was about to kill Jim Tolley. But somehow, instead of increasing, the fierce triumph that he'd felt in contemplating this moment was ebbing away. Before, he

hadn't thought it would be cowardly to shoot from ambush a man like Jim Tolley, any more than it would be cowardly to stand off and kill a snake.

But now, all at once, Buck Flame felt that he was about to do a cowardly and despicable thing. He felt guilty as hell. He hated Jim Tolley, but he didn't have anything against that golden-haired girl. Buck Flame knew suddenly that he couldn't murder Jim Tolley like that, no matter how much he deserved to die. He'd wait till he caught Tolley alone, then kill him.

Buck Flame's finger relaxed on the trigger. He straightened, leaned back against the wall. And at that instant a sharp, rattling sound beat in his ears. Quick terror stabbed at Buck Flame—he had always been deathly afraid of rattlesnakes. He writhed aside, twisting his head around.

In the wall behind him, almost on a level with his eyes, there was a narrow rock ledge fashioned like a pocket. And in the pocket, as he whirled, Buck Flame saw a giant bull rattler, its bloated coils jerked into a tight coil, its flat, wicked head poised.

Desperately, Buck Flame flung himself backward. But he wasn't quick enough. The flat head lashed out viciously. Buck Flame stumbled over something, and lost his balance, conscious of a sharp, numbing pain just over one eye. Momentarily stricken with panic, he realized two things: the bull rattler had buried its venomous fangs in his forehead—and he was falling.

He grabbed frantically at the edge of the shelf, but the crumbly shale gave way and he tumbled grotesquely down the broken, sloping wall. He landed with a numbing jar on the trail not ten feet in front of the horses. He lay there, gasping for breath, savage pain slashing at one of his legs. His head, where the snake had struck him, seemed shot through with fire.

Buck Flame lay there, unable to move, fighting to down the terror that flooded through his heart. He knew his leg was broken, but that didn't matter. He thought he could feel the snake poison spreading through the bloodstreams of his body—and he of course couldn't tie a tourniquet around his head. For the first time in his life Buck Flame knew wild, unreasoning fear.

He heard footsteps, looked up and saw Jim Tolley, amazement stamped on his thin, seamed face, coming toward him. Jim Tolley stooped over him, and abruptly Buck saw startled recognition flash across the gray features. Tolley looked quickly up at the cliffside, then at the rifle that lay beside Buck Flame on the ground. Jim Tolley's face went blank again.

"What happened, stranger?" Tolley asked. "You hurt bad?"

"Bad," Buck Flame said, and despised himself because his voice quivered. "Bad as hell, I reckon. Snake bit me."

"Over the eye, eh?" Jim Tolley clipped. "That's bad. But mebby we kin fix you up. Just hold onto yore nerve."

Buck Flame didn't know what to say or do. He would have died rather than receive help from Jim Tolley. But he was too sick and plagued by pain to protest when Tolley took a keen-bladed knife from his pocket and quickly slashed deeply two ways across the two red, purple-rimmed spots that had formed on his forehead where the snake had bitten him. Buck Flame could feel a spurt of blood over his face, but he didn't feel any fresh pain.

"Let me, father," said a soft, firm voice.

BUCK FLAME had closed his eyes, but now he opened them and saw the golden-haired girl bending over him. He closed his eyes again; but he could feel her nearness, could feel her soft young lips as they touched the wound on his

forehead and sucked hard. The pain was spreading downward through his body now, making it feel numb and paralyzed. Nausea rolled in waves over him, and he was deathly sick. But, through the purple mists that swirled about him, he could feel Kay Tolley's soft lips drawing the vicious snake poison from his blood.

Then inky blackness surged over him, and when he opened his eyes again he was no longer lying on the dusty trail. He was lying on a soft, white bed near a window in a strange room. Through the window he could see the rolling plain, and the sun sinking down in a riot of colors toward the blue hills. Remembrance flooded through Buck Flame; and, instantly alert with the instinctive distrust of his breed, he looked about the room.

Kay Tolley sat across the room beside another window, staring off toward the hills. Her young face was still and grave in the soft red shadows. As Buck Flame stirred, she turned, got to her feet and came to the bedside and looked down at him. Her eyes were grave, too, and haunted by shadows.

"You look hungry," she said. "Are you?"

Buck Flame realized suddenly that he was ravenously hungry. He hadn't eaten since the day before. He remembered that this slim girl was Jim Tolley's daughter, and resentment welled hotly. He wanted to say, "I'm hungry as hell—but I'd starve before I'd eat Jim Tolley's grub!"

But, instead, he said softly, "I'm hungry. But don't go to no trouble over me."

The girl smiled. "It won't be any trouble," she said. "I've been waiting for you to regain consciousness. You'll be all right now."

She went into another room, walking with a lithe easy grace, and returned almost instantly with dishes of warm food. She placed the food before Buck Flame, returned to the window. She watched as he ate, that same grave, questioning look in her eyes, as though something was troubling her. Buck Flame wondered if she knew who he was, if she knew why he'd been on the canyon wall.

He wanted to ask her where Jim Tolley was, but he didn't. He thought he knew the answer to that anyway. Jim Tolley would be riding like hell for Lucifer Flats, to bring the sheriff. Buck Flame smiled bitterly, and looked down at his broken leg, realizing suddenly that the bones had been straightened and set in a rude but effective cast. His guns were gone—he would be helpless if the sheriff came. . . .

As he lay there, feeling Kay Tolley's probing, puzzled gaze upon him, Buck Flame's mind went back ten years. He saw again the crowded courtroom in Lucifer Flats, saw the tense, eager looks on the faces of the spectators. He heard again the harsh voice of the district attorney; saw the stern faces of the jurymen as they listened to the damning testimony of the man on the witness stand.

That man had been Jim Tolley. He'd sat there and answered the district attorney's leading questions, confident, a little cocky because of the important testimony he was giving. Jim Tolley had been a stage driver then, and his coach had been held up a couple of weeks before and robbed of a shipment of money on the way to the Lucifer Flats bank. But the bandit, alone and masked, hadn't stopped at robbery. He'd shot down in cold blood the stage guard as he sat with upraised hands beside Jim Tolley.

On the witness stand, Jim Tolley had sworn he recognized the bandit. He swore it was Buck Flame. The bandit's mask had slipped, Tolley said, and he'd seen the V-shaped scar that Buck Flame had on one cheek. And the killer had been Buck Flame's size, had talked like him, was riding a big black gelding like Buck Flame's. So Jim Tolley had been confident it was Buck Flame.

The jury's verdict of guilty, with a sentence of life imprisonment, was popular. Buck Flame hadn't lived in Lucifer Flats long, and he was a professional gambler, and as such was looked upon with suspicion and distrust. The townsfolk knew Buck Flame was slick with a poker deck, and they thought any gent who made his living with cards was bound to be crooked and mean as hell. And they knew Jim Tolley was honest and dependable. They watched Buck Flame led off to the pen, said some of the cussedness would be taken out of him there, then forgot about him.

Buck Flame's mind skipped quickly over the ten years he'd spent in prison. And over the six months that had passed since the day he escaped. In the prison break he'd been wounded in half a dozen places. But he'd got away into the desert. For three hellish days and nights he'd run and crawled and dodged across the blazing, heat-lashed desert. Then, by some miracle, he'd made it into the mountains before giving way to the black hands that were trying to pull him down . . . A week later he'd regained consciousness in the hut of an old Yaqui Indian.

Three months had passed before Buck Flame walked again; two more he'd spent in regaining his strength. The old Yaqui hadn't asked any questions. He'd taken care of Buck Flame, and, when Buck was ready to leave, had given him a gun and a scrawny horse, knowing probably that Buck was riding to kill a man.

Now Buck Flame had come back to find Jim Tolley no longer a stage driver, but an old, white-haired man with haunted, desperate eyes, rodding a two-bit cow outfit. That had puzzled Buck Flame, just as he had been puzzled for ten years over why Jim Tolley had lied him into the pen. For Buck Flame hadn't robbed that stage and killed the guard. He hadn't known anything about it. . . .

AFTER Buck had eaten, Kay Tolley took the dishes without speaking and went back into the kitchen. A while later Buck heard her talking low-voiced to somebody, and then Jim Tolley came into the room.

Jim Tolley stood there looking down at him, and in the old rancher's dull eyes Buck could see that same worried, desperate look that had been in Kay's, only a thousand times worse.

Tolley no longer made a pretense of not knowing him.

"Feel better now, Buck?" he asked softly.

Buck Flame didn't say anything. He lay there and looked up at Jim Tolley, a prey to conflicting emotions. Hate mingled with wonderment over why Tolley hadn't yet brought the sheriff for him. All his old bitterness and vengeance-lust rushed back and stormed like a raging torrent through him. He wanted to rear up and grab Jim Tolley by the throat, but he was almost too weak to move. Raging, accusing words rose to his lips, but he couldn't say them. He just lay there, flaying Jim Tolley with his eyes.

And, after a moment, Jim Tolley sighed wearily, turned and went back into the other room.

Buck Flame lay there, his savage passions ebbing gradually, wondering about the baffled, hopeless look in Jim Tolley's eyes. . . .

But it was almost a week later when Buck Flame found out what, in ten short years, had turned Jim Tolley from a swaggering, cocky stage driver into a broken old man. By then he had found out a good many things, not the least of which was, it would be hard as hell to kill Jim Tolley—because he was Kay Tolley's father. During that week Kay had taken care of him. She couldn't have looked after a husband or a sweetheart with greater tenderness and care than she did Buck Flame, in spite of the fact that she knew

who he was and why he had come here.

During that week, Jim Tolley didn't speak to him again, or come into the room. He stayed away a lot of the time —in town, Buck guessed, for two or three evenings Jim Tolley came home drunk. Each time, Kay Tolley helped her father to dismount and put him to bed, the shadows deepening in her young eyes.

One evening, as Kay sat at the window near Buck, who was propped up in bed, she told him what had happened to Jim Tolley.

"Soon after you—after the trial," Kay Tolley told him, "daddy stopped being a stage driver. He'd saved some money, and he bought this little place and started raising cattle. I was just a kid then, but I could tell something was bothering him. Then I found out what it was. I found out he was worrying because he'd sworn it was you who'd robbed his stage and killed the guard. Oh, he'd thought he was sure. But, afterward, he got to remembering things about the bandit, and then he wasn't so sure. It preyed on his mind till he got to drinking. Finally, two or three years ago, he started gambling with Duke Flynn.

"Duke Flynn is a tinhorn gambler who owns several places in Lucifer Flats. He's —bad. His eyes are cold and evil, like a snake's eyes. He's crooked, and clever enough to get by with it. Gradually, taking advantage of daddy's weakness for whiskey, he cheated him out of everything he had. He loaned him money on the ranch, taking a mortgage for five thousand dollars, then won that off him. That mortgage falls due three weeks from now. We don't have any money, and not half enough cattle to take care of it. . . ."

Buck Flame didn't say anything. He didn't feel sorry for Jim Tolley. The fact that Jim Tolley had just been mistaken, that he hadn't meant to lie him into the pen, didn't make any difference. It wouldn't keep him from killing Jim.

"It was an awful shock when you—came back," Kay Tolley went on, as though it helped her to talk. "We thought you were dead — everybody thinks it. They said, after you were shot trying to escape, that you'd crawled off into the desert and died."

Buck Flame grinned bitterly, said, "That's swell! I guess Jim Tolley got a kick out of that, when he'd tell folks how I'd once robbed his stage."

"But he didn't tell folks that. He *knew* it wasn't you that did it, then!"

Kay Tolley had been looking out the window; but now she turned and looked at Buck Flame, clashing emotions mirrored on her face. Amazement, incredulity —then pity.

"You mean, you don't—know?" she whispered bewilderedly.

Struck by the stark intensity of her emotions, Buck Flame asked, "Was there something I ought to know?"

KAY TOLLEY laughed, a half-hysterical sound that stuck in her throat. "Yes, I think you ought to know," she said. "A week after you broke out of prison, a man died in Lucifer Flats—a man named Bill Hafney, who'd kept a livery stable there a good many years. And on his death-bed Bill Hafney confessed it was he who had robbed that stage ten years ago, and framed you into the pen.

"You'd left your black horse in his stable for a couple of days, while you went up in the hills on a fishing trip. So Bill Hafney dressed like you, painted a scar on his cheek with red paint, took your horse and went out to rob the stage, imitating your actions and your talk, so Jim Tolley would think it was you. Bill Hafney swore that, just before he died. If you'd waited a week longer you would have been free anyhow!"

Buck Flame stared at Kay Tolley with stunned, incredulous eyes. The things she

had just told him were almost unbelievable, yet he knew they were true. A reactionary flood of relief swept over him, leaving him weak. . . .

At the end of two weeks Buck Flame was able to hobble about the house, using a rude crutch Kay Tolley had fashioned. He had recovered from the snakebite, and the bones in his leg were knitting nicely. Soon he would be able to leave. Buck Flame thought about that, and gradually he realized that he wasn't in any hurry to leave Jim Tolley's house.

He still hated Jim Tolley, he told himself; he still aimed to kill Jim Tolley, some day. But more than he hated Jim Tolley, he loved Jim Tolley's slim, blue-eyed daughter. He'd fought against it. He knew it was ironic, and funny as hell. But he couldn't stop loving her, any more than he could have stopped the wind from blowing. He knew it was a crazy, wild thing, but that didn't change it either.

Buck Flame had never seen Duke Flynn, but hate for the tinhorn Lucifer Flats gambler was growing in his heart. Sometimes, at night, he heard Jim Tolley and Kay talking in the next room. Jim Tolley's voice would be ragged, heavy with despair and rage; Kay's, low and courageous.

Then, one night, he heard Kay crying softly, and begging Jim Tolley to do something. He couldn't tell what it was, but he knew it was something that Duke Flynn wanted them to do. He heard Jim Tolley say harshly. "I won't do it, girl. That snake kin have the ranch, and be damned —but I won't ever agree to that!"

At the end of three weeks Buck Flame was able to support his weight gingerly on his bad leg. Almost daily now he saddled his bronc and went for short rides. Sometimes Kay Tolley rode with him. Jim Tolley didn't avoid him now; he was almost pitifully anxious to please Buck Flame, to show him how sorry he was for the thing he'd done. Maybe Jim Tolley wasn't such a snaky gent after all, Buck decided. But he was anxious to be away, where he couldn't see the shadowy fear and worry in Kay Tolley's young eyes.

ONE evening Buck Flame sat in the shadows beside the window and watched a rider mounted on a prancing black horse come up to Jim Tolley's little ranchhouse and stop. Instinctively Buck knew that this gaunt, hawk-faced, flashily-dressed gent was Duke Flynn. Duke Flynn was dark, arrogant-looking, and about him there was an air of ruthless, dominant cruelty that instantly struck in Buck Flame a spark of fierce antagonism.

He saw the dark-faced gambler dismount, swagger into the house and to the little kitchen where he knew Kay Tolley was cooking supper. The door was closed between the rooms, but Buck Flame could hear what they said. Kay's voice was low, throaty with loathing and contempt; Duke Flynn's deep, purring, amused.

"Why don't you stay away?" he heard Kay Tolley demand. "The Star C doesn't belong to you yet. Until it does, you're not wanted around. When I'm no longer here you can come when you please."

"Then I wouldn't be interested in coming," Duke Flynn said, and laughed softly. "I don't want this two-bit cow outfit, Kay; you know that. I want you. When I want a woman, I usually get her, one way or another. I'll get you. Just say the word and I'll tear up that mortgage. Then Jim Tolley could stay here the rest of his life. And you could have anything you wanted."

"I'd rather starve than marry you," Kay said contemptuously.

"Maybe you'll change your mind," Duke Flynn purred. "Maybe you'll be glad to marry me, before I'm through. . . ."

Buck Flame sat there and listened, slow anger kindling inside him. He looked over at his belt and gun, hanging on the

bedpost. The gunbelt had been there the second morning when he awoke, had been there ever since. He hadn't touched it. But now, in just another minute, he knew that he'd have to get it, go into the next room and start pumping lead into Duke Flynn's belly.

Now he knew why the shadows of fear and dread lay always in Kay Tolley's blue eyes. Now he knew that a few nights ago she had been begging Jim Tolley to let her marry Duke Flynn, in exchange for the mortgage against the Star C.

Just as Buck Flame was reaching for his gun, old Jim Tolley rode up and dismounted in front of the ranchhouse. He went inside, his bootheels thumping angrily, and a moment later Buck heard him raging, "Damn you, Flynn, you pesterin' my girl ag'in? I told you I'd kill yuh if you didn't stop it. Now you get the hell outa here, and stay!"

Duke Flynn's laugh was cold, amused. "Cool off, Tolley," he said. "I rode out here to talk to you. I've got a proposition to make."

"I've listened to too many uh yore rotten propositions now," Jim Tolley spat. "You've got all my money, and now you'll get my ranch—all I've got left. What in hell more do yuh want?"

"Your money and ranch are nothing," Duke Flynn said softly. "You've got something else that I want a lot more than either of those. And I get what I want—you know that. But I won't be unreasonable; I like to give a gent an even break. You want to hear my proposition?"

"Any proposition you make'd be snaky," Jim Tolley blared. "But—well, what is it?"

"I'm a gambler, Tolley, and so are you," Duke Flynn went on. "We get a kick out of taking chances. You want the mortgage I hold against your place—I want your girl. That's my proposition: that piece of paper against your girl, and no whining from the loser. What do you say?"

"I say yo're a lousy, filth-eatin' buzzard!" Jim Tolley bawled wrathfully. "Damn yuh, Flynn, get outa here or I'll blow yuh in two!"

Kay Tolley said sharply, "Daddy—put up that gun!"

Duke Flynn laughed, a low, wolfish sound. "You're a fool, Tolley," he said flatly. "You have just three days to change your mind. After that, I'll have your ranch and your girl both!"

Duke Flynn swaggered from the house, mounted the big black and galloped away across the plain. Buck Flame sat there and watched him ride away, tormented by indecision. . . .

THAT night Buck Flame decided to go away, even though he knew it would be a cowardly thing to do. He'd fallen in love with Kay Tolley, but he didn't try to fool himself about her.

Kay Tolley wasn't for him. She'd been nice to him, taken care of him, just because she was trying to make up for what Jim Tolley had done to him. She was probably in love with some honest, decent young cowboy. And there wasn't any sense in his making a fool of himself, trying to help her, and maybe get himself back in the pen. He'd be crazy to go gunning for Duke Flynn, he told himself. Duke Flynn no doubt had a bunch of hired gunslicks to back his plays.

And as for Jim Tolley—to hell with him! He was doing Jim Tolley a favor, just letting him live.

Buck could wash his hands of the whole business and ride away, go up to Oregon or Montana where he wasn't known and start all over again. That was what he was thinking the next evening as he buckled on his gunbelt, went out to the corral and started saddling his dun bronc. Jim Tolley had ridden away an hour before; Kay was in the house. Buck hoped

she wouldn't see him before he got away, for he felt guilty as hell.

But she must have been watching; she came out to the corral just as he climbed into the saddle. She stood looking up at Buck Flame, her face grave and quiet, her eyes deep, tragic wells of blue. Buck Flame knew suddenly that he hadn't fooled her, that she knew he was going away. But there was no reproach in her eyes as she looked up at him.

"You're going for a ride?" she asked.

"A little ride," Buck nodded. "I mebby won't be gone long."

"You won't come back," Kay Tolley said gravely. "I've known all day that you meant to go away. Knowing that, it was hard for me to make up my mind to do what I'm going to do, because I know you'll think I'm shameless.

"You know daddy and I are in trouble," she went on with a rush. "You know Duke Flynn was here yesterday. And you must have heard the proposition he made. It was a vile thing, that proposition; yet there is only one reason why it wasn't accepted. Daddy—is not a good gambler."

"Meanin' just what?"

"Meaning I've heard that you are, Buck Flame," Kay Tolley said, the color high in her face as she looked up at him. "I've heard father say you were the best poker player he'd ever seen. He said you were a square gambler, but that you knew all the tricks. But," her low, steady voice carried a challenge, "maybe you wouldn't be good enough for Duke Flynn. Maybe you'd be afraid to try it."

Buck Flame didn't say anything for a moment. He sat looking down at the slim girl, hiding the sudden wild flare of exultation in his heart. He knew what she was asking him to do. She was daring him to gamble with Duke Flynn—with a five thousand dollar mortgage and herself as the stakes.

"You mean you'd be willing to risk that?" Buck Flame asked slowly, deliberately. "You'd be willing to place yourself in my hands, knowing that I came here to kill Jim Tolley, that I may yet kill him?"

Wordlessly, she nodded.

"And what if I lost?"

"I don't think you'd lose," Kay Tolley said softly. "But if you did I wouldn't whine. I'd go through with my part of the bargain. I'm not afraid if you're not."

Buck Flame laughed then, the first time he had really laughed in ten years. "I'm afraid, all right," he said, as he swung to the ground beside Kay. "But I'd take you up on that, even if the hounds of hell were snapping at my heels!"

"You won't lose," Kay said, and to Buck it sounded like a promise. . . .

THE room was deathly quiet and tense. The stench of stale beer, tobacco and rot-gut whiskey filled the place. The rustle of cards, the click of chips, an occasional tight-lipped word from one of the gamblers, were the only sounds.

Duke Flynn sat hunched low in his chair, a cynical grin pulling his dark hawkish features, a dead cigar clamped between his white teeth. His black eyes were cold and slitted, his movements smooth and confident as he dealt the cards. Across the table from Flynn, his own slim fingers matching in expert deftness those of the Lucifer Flats gambler, sat Buck Flame. Flame's face was calm, frozen, expressionless.

Behind Buck Flame, her young body slim and tense, sat Kay Tolley. She was watching the lightning-flick of fingers as the cards were dealt, oblivious to the stares of the score or more range-clad men who watched the game, her eyes warm with confidence in Buck Flame. Around her slim waist was belted a black-butted .38 calibre Colt.

Behind Duke Flynn's chair stood Cotton Orde, a tow-headed, cat-eyed gent with tied-down guns. Cotton Orde was Duke Flynn's gun guard; he was always

on hand to back Flynn's crooked plays.

Twenty minutes before, the batwing doors had opened suddenly, and Buck Flame and Kay Tolley had come into the barroom. They'd stood there near the door a moment without speaking, Kay straight and defiant beside Buck, till their eyes picked out Duke Flynn, sitting at a table at one side of the room idly riffling a poker deck through his slender fingers. Then they'd strode straight to the black-eyed gambler, stopped before him.

Duke Flynn hadn't discontinued riffling the cards. His bold, eager eyes had played deliberately over Kay Tolley's rounded body.

"Flynn," Buck Flame said slowly, quietly, but loud enough, in the sudden silence that had gripped the room at their entrance, for every man in the room to hear, "I got business with you. I hear you're slick with a deck of cards, and that you like to make propositions."

"So what?" Duke Flynn asked softly.

"So I've got one of my own to make," Buck Flame told him. "It's the same one you made Jim Tolley yesterday. You hold a $5000 mortgage against Tolley's Star C outfit, due tomorrow. I want that mortgage . . . you want Kay Tolley. We'll both start with five thousand dollars worth of chips, and the one who winds up with all the chips wins. It's your own proposition, Flynn—what do you say?"

Flynn's icy, calculating eyes ran deliberately over Buck Flame. "I didn't make you that proposition," he said. "I don't even know you."

"You made it to Jim Tolley," Buck Flame said flatly. "And I'm takin' you up on it. Of course, if you want to crawl—if you're afraid you cain't stack-up against anybody but an old gent who's half-blind—that's your business!"

Duke Flynn's face flushed darkly. Again his inky eyes, openly eager and covetous, ran over Kay Tolley, and he said, "If I agreed to that, how do I know the—other party—would be willing? How do I know you have a right to make such a bargain?"

"He has the right," Kay Tolley said quickly, steadily. "Anything he says or does suits me!"

"Then, why not?" Duke Flynn purred. "I don't know you, you don't know me. But the stakes are attractive, so we'll gamble. Well, we're wasting time. . . ."

AN HOUR later the mocking, amused smile had left Duke Flynn's thin lips. His eyes had become agate-hard, his teeth were clamped grimly about the dead cigar. He was playing sharp poker, and he was losing. He still was coldly confident, but now he knew that in the lanky, tawny-haired Buck Flame he had a worthy opponent. And he was beginning to remember that behind him stood Cotton Orde, always ready to back with powdersmoke any play he might be forced to make.

Buck Flame was playing coldly, deliberately. An old, fierce thrill was riding him, a thrill he had not known in ten years. The feel of the cards in his hands sent old memories surging through him. It gave him the complete confidence that he had missed at first. It hadn't taken him long to see that Duke Flynn was slick with cards, slick as hell. But not any slicker than Buck Flame had been ten years ago. After the first few hands, Buck knew that he could beat Duke Flynn.

He was scarcely aware of the spectators pressed closely about the table, bodies hunched forward, tense, avid eyes watching each play. But he was keenly aware of the slim, white-faced girl sitting silently at his elbow. Her nearness, the utter trust she had placed in him, made exultation run high in his heart. Yet his eyes and mind were focused wholly upon the man across the table from him.

Never had the watchers seen such a vicious poker game; its cold savagery would of necessity make it short. As the

game progressed, as more and more of his chips shifted to Buck Flame's side of the table, Duke Flynn's face became set, scowling, his eyes became narrow slits of inky fire. His movements, as he shuffled the cards, were quick, smooth, deft.

Now Duke Flynn was losing some of his cold confidence. Some of the greedy triumph had left his eyes. He was playing desperately, using every trick he knew, bringing into play all his cunning and trickery. But still he lost. Still the chips that represented $5000 shifted to Buck Flame's side of the table.

Buck Flame's brand of poker was new to Duke Flynn. He wasn't accustomed to losing, nor to being fooled by a cold bluff. Bluffing was one of his own tricks; it made rage kindle in his ebony eyes to be taken by a bluff himself.

Once Buck Flame folded his cards, grimaced, said, "These ain't so good. They rate a pass."

"Fifty on these," Duke Flynn grinned.

Buck Flame peeped at his five cards again. Then he shoved two stacks of chips into the center. "And a hundred more," he said softly. "I musta overlooked my hand."

Duke Flynn quit grinning. He shoved more chips into the pot, faced his three kings on the table. Buck Flame grinned mockingly, showed a small diamond flush and raked the pot. A quick curse ripped from Flynn's lips, his long fingers twitched nervously.

"It ain't human to have such luck," he spat. "Hombre, if I thought you was. . . ."

"You'd do what?" Buck said softly.

With a quick, savage movement Duke Flynn seized the cards, flung them across the room, called for a new deck. Tiny beads of sweat stood out on his forehead as he opened the fresh deck. A tremor ran through the room. Kay Tolley hadn't moved during the last five minutes. Now her wide eyes had shifted from the gamblers; they were fixed on the tow-headed Cotton Orde, standing behind Flynn.

The intensity of her gaze must have warned Cotton Orde. The little gunman's yellowish eyes jerked away from Buck Flame, shifted to Kay Tolley. He licked his lips, like a hungry cat; but his hand fell away from the gun-butt it had been fondling.

The game went on. And still Buck Flame won. Now Duke Flynn was three thousand loser—now four. . . . Deliberately, without conscience, Buck Flame was stripping the dark-faced tinhorn, beating him at his own tricks. A desperate, trapped look came into Duke Flynn's eyes. He became nervous, and his slim fingers lost their smooth deftness. Several times Buck Flame saw him cheat. But he gave no sign.

He wanted to call Duke Flynn's hand and grab for the long-barreled .45 that nestled against his thigh. But then he'd see the folded piece of paper on the table between them — the $5000 mortgage against Jim Tolley's Star C outfit. And he'd remember that Kay Tolley was mortgaged, too, body and soul—until that piece of paper was won and torn up. . . .

BUCK FLAME continued to win Time and again he bluffed, and turned his cards face-up under Duke Flynn's eyes. With cold deliberateness he goaded Flynn into a savage fury. He could feel Kay Tolley's warm, magnetic presence at his elbow. He was dimly aware of the silence, of the tense expectancy that held the room. But he saw only Duke Flynn's slitted, savage eyes before him. . . .

On the last hand, Duke Flynn tried to bluff. He bet the last of his chips on a busted flush. Buck Flame called, a mocking, taunting grin on his lips, and turned his cards face up on the table. Duke Flynn looked down at the cards, a terrible fascination in his glaring eyes. Aces and eights—dead man's hand!

Then, suddenly, Duke Flynn's jittery

nerves snapped. He reared to his feet, a harsh, shrill curse ripping from his lips; stood half-crouched, like a scrawny, hate-maddened wolf, his sable eyes crawling with murder-lust.

Buck Flame sat there and looked up at him. He was still grinning, that taunting, reckless grin. "You're snaky as hell, Flynn," he said softly. "You're a phoney, yella-bellied polecat. We both cheated—but I cheated even more than you did. What do you aim to do about it?"

Duke Flynn sent his gaunt body curveting to one side, and grabbed lightning-fast for his gun. Then several things happened at once. Snarling gun-thunder shook the room. Gun-flame speared across the table, straight into Duke Flynn's belly, and the close-range bullet from Buck's gun smashed the tinhorn to the floor. Buck felt something pluck at his gun arm, knew that Flynn's shot, though deflected, had caught him. Pandemonium broke loose as the spectators dived for shelter.

Through boiling powdersmoke Buck saw Duke Flynn fall. But, from the tail of his eye, he saw something else that sent quick despair stabbing through him. The first rush of the spectators had thrown Cotton Orde off balance. But now he stood in the clear, hunched like a big cat about to leap, gun swinging toward Buck Flame. And then Buck found that he was unable to lift his .45 with his bullet-shattered arm!

As he flung himself desperately aside, a roaring gunshot beat in his ears and lashing powder-flame seared his face. He went to his knees, staring in amazement at Cotton Orde. The little gunman was whirling crazily, clutching at his neck. Then his knees wobbled and he fell to the floor.

Buck Flame got slowly to his feet. He looked at Kay Tolley, standing there with a smoking pistol in her hand, her eyes blazing. Buck realized that she had seen his peril, had shot Cotton Orde just as he was about to kill Buck.

Through fogging gunsmoke their eyes met, and Kay Tolley smiled softly. Buck Flame felt a quick, fierce surge of pride, and again that wild exultation rioted through him. He took the mortgage from the table, tore it into tiny bits and flung them to the floor. Then he went to Kay Tolley, took her hand, led her out into the gathering dusk.

The strong wind, chill with the coming blizzard, grabbed at them and flung them close together. Kay Tolley didn't pull away. As they went along the darkening street toward their horses, she looked up at Buck Flame and smiled again, and now the shadows were gone from her young eyes.

That smile seemed to say to Buck Flame, "You gambled for me—and won. I'm yours!"

And he knew that was true.

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By Walt Coburn LAW OF THE

(Author of "The Kid Who Tamed the Badlands," etc.)

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TWO men stood in the middle of the street at Chinook, Montana. They faced each other fifty feet apart, and each had a six-shooter holstered on his thigh. It was just before dusk and the windows of the saloons threw yellow light on them. One was tall, rawboned, red complexioned, with greenish bloodshot eyes and a nose that had been broken and badly set. The man standing facing him was short, heavy shouldered, with graying black hair and drooping mous-

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tache. His legs were incredibly bowed. His eyes, steel gray and hard, stared at the bigger man from under shaggy black brows.

Crowds of men, mostly cowpunchers, bartenders, tin horn gamblers, with a scattering of citizens, lined the plank walks on either side of the wide street. Midway between the two, yet a little out of the line of fire, stood a tall man in a stovepipe hat, with a heavy gold cased watch in his hand. Long jawed, solemn-visaged, he was dressed in black frock coat and pants. He might have been mistaken for a preacher, save for the fact that he wore a sagging cartridge belt around his middle and a white-handled six-shooter low along his thigh. His high-

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topped hat, too, was tilted at a rakish angle and there was a huge diamond ring on the left hand that waved a long black cigar.

"Get ready, gentlemen!" His voice rolled out from behind shining white teeth in sonorous tones. "Go!"

The two men in the middle of the street drew their guns with lightning rapidity. Both guns blazed at precisely the same split second. The roaring of the two guns blended, as the crowd on either side of the street watched breathlessly.

Then both smoking guns were mute, the six-chambered cylinders empty of loads. Yet both duelists remained on their feet. Neither showed a blood mark anywhere. They straightened from their half crouching postures, and began calmly reloading their guns.

"Of all the rotten shootin'!"

A man wearing a bartender's apron turned to eye the young cowpuncher who had made the remark. "What's that you said, young feller?"

"I just saw those two empty their guns at each other. They're both still standin'. Neither of 'em hurt, unless he's bleedin' inside."

"A stranger, ain't yuh?"

"Just now got in. Sighted the crowd, and—"

"Then shut up and watch."

The man in the stovepipe hat motioned the two combatants towards him. When they came up, he reached out with both hands and removed their hats. He examined the two high crowned hats carefully as the crowd gathered around.

"Four holes in Lige Brandon's hat," he said, handing the hat to the big, red-faced man.

"I tally five in your Stetson, Jay." He handed the other hat to the stocky bow-legged man. "Looks like Lige wins."

"Hold on, Deacon," said the short-statured man, bending his head and pointing a stubby forefinger at the top of his heavy iron gray hair. "Just feel there."

The silk hatted man felt of the short man's head. His long white fingers came away stained red.

"Gentlemen," he lifted his voice, "at first it looked like Lige Brandon had won this shootin' match. He put five holes through Jay Turley's hat, against four that I tallied in Lige's sky-piece. But one of Lige's bullets nicked Jay's scalp. Which gives Jay Turley the game, and Lige Brandon pays off as loser. Loser's penalty, as usual, is to buy the two new beaver hats, and drinks for the thirsty. As an extra penalty, because he drew blood, Lige Brandon owes Jay Turley one hundred head of steers. Gentlemen, the show is over. We will now adjourn to the White Elephant and wash the powdersmoke from our lungs with likker."

THE white-aproned saloon man turned to the young cowpuncher who stood there, wonderment stamped on his dust-powdered, tanned face.

"You was saying something, young feller, about rotten shootin'?"

"If there's a dog hole under the sidewalk, mister," said the cowboy, grinning sheepishly, "I'm willin' to crawl in it. "Is that Lige Brandon, the Skillet trail-boss? And J Cross T Turley?"

"None other. Just come up with their trail herds. They needed new hats. It looks like Lige is payin' for 'em."

The young cowpuncher motioned towards the man in the stovepipe hat who was carrying the bullet-riddled Stetsons into the White Elephant Saloon.

"Deason Moss," explained the saloon man, "River gambler. Fastest gun-slinger that ever come up the Missouri River."

"That's Deacon Moss?"

The saloon man glanced sharply at the young cowpuncher. Something in the tone of the cowboy's voice attracted the saloonman's curiosity.

The cowboy was in his twenties, per-

haps—square-jawed, wide-mouthed, with puckered blue eyes and straw colored hair. His eyes were narrowed as he stared at the river gambler. And his hand rested on the butt of his gun.

"I'm no mind reader, young feller," the red-faced saloonman broke into the cowboy's thoughts, "but whatever you're thinkin', stop it. You ain't in that card-sharp's class. Deacon Moss is a killer. Cards and hair-triggered guns is his business. He works at it. So walk easy, young feller, and lay low. I live in a cabin back of the White Elephant an' I'll be off shift at six in the mornin'. Drop in on me and we might talk turkey. I got no love for that gamblin' man. My name's Cash Mitchell. I own part of the White Elephant. Deacon Moss is my partner. What's your name while you're in Montana Territory?"

The young cowpuncher looked steadily into the whiskey-filmed eyes of the saloonman. And he saw nothing there that he trusted.

"You shore said a-plenty, mister," he drawled, his wide mouth spreading in a slow grin, "when you said you was no mind reader."

He turned and walked away, leaving Cash Mitchell standing there, scowling, his thick lips muttering, and hate congesting his pig-like eyes.

"The damned, smart Aleck young son!" he muttered, turning into the doorway of his saloon. "Coverin', is he? But I seen what I seen."

The young cowpuncher rounded a corner of the log store and entered by the rear door.

Lige Brandon and Jay Turley, surrounded by half a doxen cowpunchers, were at the long counter. The storekeeper was taking hat boxes from a shelf. Jay Turley was wiping blood from his bullet-nicked scalp with a soiled bandana. A faint grin on his leathery face.

Lige Brandon, head and shoulders taller than the J Cross T man, stood with thumbs hooked in his sagging cartridge belt. He spat a brown stream of tobacco juice ten feet, and his aim at the sawdust filled can was accurate.

"You musta flinched, Turley," he said, "I shouldn't uh nicked your skull thataway, otherwise. You musta flinched, shore as hell!" he grinned.

Jay Turley turned his eyes from the bloodstained handkerchief in his hand, up to the lanky Skillet trail-boss. Jay Turley was grinning faintly but his eyes were cold, unsmiling, focused on Lige Brandon's gaze.

"Think so, Brandon? I don't flinch easy." He turned to the storekeeper. "Size seven and a quarter. Best beaver quality you got in the house. And throw in a bottle of iodine."

The Skillet and J Cross T cowhands were joshing one another. The Skillet trail-boss had picked up a stovepipe hat several sizes too small and was looking at his grinning reflection in a mirror while the cowboys passed ribald remarks. Lige Brandon enjoyed rough clowning.

Jay Turley tried on a hat that suited him. There was no humor in his make-up and he took no pains to hide his distaste for the rough clowning and hoorawing. Lige exchanged the shiny plug hat for a red checked gingham sunbonnet and the Skillet cowboys roared approval.

"Find Jay Turley a skull cap," chuckled the sorrel-haired Skillet trail-boss. "I bet he's the only man in the country's ever had his hair parted with a bullet. I hope I done parted 'er in the middle, accordin' to the style as laid down by Deacon Moss. Good thing I didn't crop a left ear. That'd be the Skillet earmark and I'd have to claim you for my outfit. I've bin blamed for sleeper-markin' cattle but never accused of tryin' to git me a owner, though there's some superstitious minded might claim that I tried to beef Jay Turley out yonder.

"That pore shootin' is costin' me one hundred head of Skillet steers. And, gentle Annies, the owners of the Skillet iron is a-goin' to take the price of them dogies outa my hard earned wages. They can't stand a joke on theirselves when it costs 'em a hundred head of steers. If I git fired, now Jay, will you be in the market for a top hand?"

"I'm full handed," said Jay Turley, shortly. I'll ride over to your camp in the mornin' and take delivery on those steers, Lige—providin' you got enough sober hands to put 'em in the J Cross T iron. And I'll want the owners' name on the bill of sale."

The faint grin on Jay Turley's face widened. An almost humorous twinkle showed in his hard gray eyes. He pulled his new hat on and walked out of the store, spurs jingling. His J Cross T men followed him.

COMICAL dismay was stamped on Lige Brandon's sun-reddened face. He lifted both hands in sign of surrender. The red checked sunbonnet cocked sideways on his sorrel head, he spat at the sawdust-filled can.

"Boys," he said in a loud stage whisper, "you heard what that short-complected jasper said. He wants the owners' names on a bill of sale for a hundred head of Skillet steers. He's got me roped, throwed and hawgtied. Because if I was to hang fer it, I couldn't git their names on no such paper. And I'll tell you why. I don't know who in hell owns the Skillet iron, no more than you boys do. And that's the gospel.

"Boys, Jay Turley ain't got no humor in his make-up. But that don't keep him from bein' smart. Mister storeman, lemme have a seven and a half size in that same hat Jay Turley picked, to fit my knothead."

Still wearing the sunbonnet, he turned to the counter. Then he saw the young cowpuncher who had come in the back door for the first time. The grin on his sunburned face faded slowly. He stared hard at the blue-eyed cowboy.

"If you could use a man," said the young cowpuncher, "I'd like to get on."

"Yeah," nodded the Skillet trail-boss. "Yeah." Some of the color had seemed to drain from the big man's red face. Then he grinned and the color flooded back into his skin.

"You're hired. Providin', son, that I'm still roddin' the Skillet outfit tomorrow. Jay Turley just gut-shot me and I'm kinda between a chill and a sweat. Boys, git along over to the White Elephant. I'll join you directly I git me a hat to my likin'."

When the cowpunchers had left the store, Lige Brandon fitted a new hat on his head, paid for it and the hat Jay Turley had selected, peeling twenty dollar bills from a thick roll of yellowbacks. Then he nodded to the young cowpuncher to come along and went out the back door.

Outside, Lige Brandon faced the cowboy he'd just hired. "I never knowed Hank Thompson had a son. For a second, there, I figgered I was lookin' at Hank's ghost. You are Hank's boy, ain't you? Hell, you got to be!"

"I didn't know the likeness was so strong. I'm Hank Tompson's son—Steve Thompson."

"Did Jay Turley sight you?"

"No. Not yet."

"Then keep outa his sight. He'd spot you right off."

"But what has Jay Turley got to do with me, or—"

"If you don't know your own answer to that, then this ain't the time to tell you. Git your horse and pull out for the Skillet camp. We're holdin' our herd about five miles down Milk River. I'll be at camp as soon as I kin make 'er. Was you in the store when Jay Turley asked for the owners' names on the bill of sale for them steers I owe him?"

"Yes. He had his back to me and didn't see—"

"By jupes, he'll git what he asked for!" whispered the big trail-boss excitedly. "Providin', Steve Thompson, that you kin sign your own name! Now git your horse and drag it before anybody sights you. You ever done ary gun fightin', Steve?"

"No, but if I got—"

"You may git a chance to try your hand at it. Hank was the fastest man with a shootin' iron I ever seen in action, barrin' mebby Deacon Moss. Now hit the trail for camp. The cook's in town drunk and there won't be nobody at camp that'll know you. Say, where'd you come from, anyhow? Hank never told me he had a son."

"Hank Thompson didn't know he had a son livin'." Steve Thompson's voice was flat and the finality of it checked any questions the big red-faced trail-boss might have wanted to ask.

"Well I'll be damned! I got to show up at the White Elephant or Deacon Moss and Turley will think I'm welshin' the bet. See you at camp."

He moved off on his long legs, his spurs jingling loudly in the shadows. Steve Thompson saw him round the corner of the store and go out of sight.

"I hope," Steve scowled, his hand coming away from his gun, "I don't have to kill Lige Brandon. Crook or no crook, I like him. Yet it looks like he mighty near killed Jay Turley. And he's the man they claim killed Hank Thompson!"

CHAPTER TWO

Heir to Hell-On-the-Hoof

STEVE THOMPSON had never seen his father. Until a few weeks ago he didn't know that his real name was Thompson and that his real father was Hank Thompson, Texan, owner of the Skillet iron. It was only after Steve had shot and killed Frank Webber that Steve learned the truth. Then his mother, on her death-bed, told Steve and the sheriff the strange story of Steve's parentage.

"I was married to Hank Thompson in Texas," she said. "Hank was the wealthiest cowman in that part of Texas. He was thirty-five. I was sixteen, too young to know what love was. Before we were married a month we each realized the mistake we'd made. We lived together three months. Then Hank gave me ten thousand dollars and told me to go somewhere and get my divorce. Ten thousand dollars looked like all the money in the world to me.

"I was going to have a baby. I knew that, but I was afraid to tell Hank for fear he'd never divorce me if we had a child. I took the money and went to El Paso and there got my divorce after the baby was born and baptized Stephen Thompson. I met Frank Webber in El Paso when my baby was only four years old. Frank was a gambler and bronc-rider, the handsomest, most fascinating man I'd ever seen. I fell in love with him and married him. Steve grew up thinking Frank Webber was his real father. To avoid complications we called the boy Steve Webber.

"Steve never liked Frank. They didn't get along. Frank was jealous of the boy. And because I was mortally afraid of losing Frank, I neglected little Steve more and more. Steve ran away when he was fourteen; went up the cattle trail. God forgive me, I let my boy go. Let him leave me when he most needed a mother's love and care. After that I saw him only a few times, and each time we met we'd grown farther apart.

"I thought that letting my son go would draw Frank Webber, my husband, closer to me. But it didn't. Gradually he gambled away all my money. He left me, time after time, for other women. I was working in a store trimming hats when my

father died in Texas and left me a few thousand dollars. I took the money and opened up a millinery store of my own.

"Frank Webber had a gambling partner named Deacon Moss," Steve's mother went on. "I never saw Moss; never met him. But Frank had told me about Moss and how they were going to work up and down the cattle trails where the pickings were fat. Because Frank had always hated Steve, he told me that some day he and Deacon Moss were going to get Steve's father in a poker game and clean him.

"I'd never loved Hank Thompson, but I respected him because he was the squarest man I'd ever known. And I had no respect for my tin-horn husband, but I loved him. Can you understand that? Without telling Hank Thompson that he had a son, I wrote him a letter warning him against Frank Webber. Whether or not he got the letter, I don't know.

"I hadn't seen Frank Webber for three years. He learned I'd inherited money. He hunted me up. Found me in Denver at my cottage at the rear of the millinery store. He demanded money. I refused to give him any. My love for him had turned to bitter hatred. I saw for the first time what he was—a cheap, flashy, crooked tinhorn. I told him what I thought of him.

"He'd beaten me before. He grabbed me by the throat and was choking me and beating me when Steve showed up. I had written Steve of my good fortune and asked him to pay me a visit and see if we couldn't somehow become mother and son again. I told him I hated Frank Webber, that I never wanted to see Frank again. And that I had something important to tell him. I meant to tell Steve about his real father—make some sort of amends for the wrong I'd done the boy.

"So Steve came to see me. He found Frank Webber there in my home, choking and beating me. Steve had grown to manhood. He gave Frank Webber the worst whipping that tinhorn ever got. Then threw him out the back door. Frank pulled a gun and commenced shooting. One of his bullets struck me in the chest. My son Steve pulled his gun and fired. His first shot struck Frank Webber in the heart and killed him.

"That's the truth, Sheriff. It's my dying statement. My son Steve shot in self-defense. The man he killed is not his father. My son's legal name is Stephen Thompson. His real father is Hank Thompson who owns the Skillet brand in Texas. You'll see that my son gets a fair trial?"

"You bet he will, ma'am," said the sheriff. "There should be a bounty on Frank Webber's mangy hide. Steve should git a reward for riddin' the country of that tinhorn."

Steve's mother had died in his arms, happier than she'd ever been, perhaps, and at peace with her own conscience.

"Hunt up your real father, Steve," she'd made him promise. "He'll be proud of you. You have an outfit of your own. You earned it all yourself. And Hank Thompson will be proud of his son. Go to him, Steve. Frank Webber bragged before he started choking me that he had smashed Hank. If you find Deacon Moss, he'll know. Go to your father, Steve. If he needs you, help him. He was the squarest, finest man I ever knew."

AT DODGE CITY Steve had learned that a trail herd in the Skillet iron had gone north, up the trail to Montana, with Lige Brandon in charge as trail-boss. And Steve had heard it reported that Hank Thompson had been killed down in Texas by Lige Brandon.

There were any number of stories how Hank Thompson had met death, and they all differed. But it was known that Hank Thompson, shortly before his death, had lost his outfit to a tinhorn gambler named Frank Webber, who, shortly afterward,

had been shot dead by his own son.

The latter part was true enough. Rather than drag the name of Thompson into the court, Steve had stood trial under the name of Steve Webber.

"Get a man to look after your little spread here in Colorado, Steve," the Denver sheriff had advised the young cowhand after his acquittal. "As Hank Thompson's son, you're heir to the Skillet outfit. If Frank Webber or Deacon Moss got hold of it, they pulled a crooked deal to git it—though Deacon Moss claims to be a square gambler."

Steve had followed the Skillet trail herd to Chinook, Montana. Had reached town just in time to witness that strange duel between the Skillet trail-boss, Lige Brandon, and Jay Cross Turley. And none other than Deacon Moss had been refereeing the strange gun-duel.

The death of Hank Thompson was shrouded in mystery. The ownership of the Skillet iron was likewise a secret—one that Lige Brandon claimed not to share. Steve was puzzled. What sort of strange enmity existed, then, between Lige Brandon and Jay Cross Turley, that they'd challenge one another to such a test of marksmanship, calling for cold nerve and honesty? What did that nick on Jay Cross Turley's scalp mean? That Lige Brandon had tried to kill Turley? Where did Deacon Moss, gambler and gun-slinger in his own right, figure into the puzzle?

Steve couldn't trust Lige Brandon, in spite of the fact that he'd taken an instant liking to the big, homely, battered looking trail-boss. Jay Cross Turley, whose name was a by-word from Texas to Montana as a man entirely lacking in a sense of humor but as square as a die, had not accused Lige Brandon of trying to kill him. But he had challenged Lige to prove ownership of the Skillet iron.

Steve was reluctant to leave Chinook, but he took Lige Brandon's advice. That big trail-boss was playing a deep game of some kind. Tomorrow at sunrise Lige Brandon meant to produce Steve as owner of the Skillet iron—spring it as a bombshell surprise on Jay Cross Turley.

"I'll play what cards Lige Brandon dealt me," decided Steve as he saddled his horse at the feed barn and rode down Milk River in the direction of the Skillet camp. "Play the hand that's dealt me and back it with my gun, if I have to!"

With the lights of the town behind him, he followed a wide trail that went down the river, bordered by clumps of willows and wild roses. He rode under the shadowy, leafy branches of giant cottonwoods, with glimpses now and then of a round white moon overhead in the star-filled Montana sky.

Steve had no love for town with its confusion of noise and gambling, drinking and fighting and rowdy, drunken sport. He was no Puritan but he'd never done much gambling and his drinking was limited to a glass of beer now and then.

He passed a breed camp on the river bank. Those music- and dance-loving Cree and French Canadian breeds were having a dance in a big barn. Steve rode up and dismounted, watching through the wide open doorway.

The friendly breeds saw that he was alone, and that he was not one of the town hoodlums or drunken cowpunchers come to break up their dance. They offered him a drink from the jug and he dared not refuse. They were cordial enough in their invitation to come in and dance with them.

He saw no other white man around. The girls were all breeds, and a lot of them almighty pretty, too. But Steve had business to attend to. He was riding to the Skillet camp to await the coming of Lige Brandon and perhaps get some sort of lucid explanation from the big trail-boss.

"I got no girl," he told the crowd of breeds. "I'll come back if I can get my

best girl to come along back with me."

"By, gar, you do dat!" came the hearty invitation from the big half-breed fiddler who was "making de dance". "Bring de bes' gal!"

Steve mounted his horse and rode on down the river, the quick, gay strains of the fiddle playing the *Red River Jig* following him hauntingly in the moonlight.

Half an hour later he made out the wagons and tents of the Skillet camp on the river bank. Mess-tent and bed-tent showed white in the grassy, moonlit clearing among the tall cottonwoods. There were the mess-wagon and bed-wagon and the empty rope corral. The nighthawk must have the remuda grazing down the river somewhere, Steve figured. And the cattle would be bedded on the ridge half a mile or more away. All the Skillet cowhands, save four men who would be on guard all night, were in town. Lige Brandon had said that the cook was dead drunk. Steve should have the camp all to himself.

He pulled up instinctively at the edge of the clearing, with caution born of habit. Lige Brandon had said something about gun fighting. Had hinted of danger involved in Steve's claiming the Skillet iron.

STEVE made out the shadowy outline of a saddled horse at the edge of some brush near the bed-tent. Then from inside the bed-tent came muffled, confused sounds. The side of the tent billowed as someone moving inside ran or fell against it. A man' voice was swearing, then a woman's stifled, choked cry sheered outside.

The sound jolted Steve with the swift memory of his mother's choked outcries when he had burst in on Frank Webber choking and beating her, as Steve gigged his horse with the spurs, pulling his gun.

He quit the saddle as his horse slid to a halt, burst into the bed-tent that was in darkness. And as he neared the open flaps of the tent a man rushed out, charging him with the fury of an attacked animal. They went to the ground with a crash. The man was clubbing at Steve with the barrel of a six-shooter. One short, hard blow of the gun barrel glanced off Steve's shoulder, sending a numbing pain along his arm, making him drop his gun. He grappled with the man, his left hand reaching up to grab the other's wrist. Then he twisted away the weapon, and felt the heavy steel strike the man's skull. The man went limp.

As Steve staggered to his feet, someone brushed past him in the darkness. He saw a figure in man's hat and short divided skirt running through the darkness. In the moonlight he could see her plainly. She was small, slim. He heard the jingle of her spurs as she ran swiftly towards the horse that stood at the edge of the brush. Without touching the stirrups the girl vaulted into the saddle.

Steve hesitated only a second, then swung aboard his horse and gave chase. Out of the tail of his eye he saw the cook, in red flannel underwear, reel drunkenly from between the mess-wagon and mess-tent, butcher knife in his hand, bellowing thickly. The cook tripped over a guy-rope and went sprawling, yelping thickly at the world in general to come on and fight.

The girl was taking the trail back to Chinook, her horse spurred to a run. But Steve's horse was faster, and he knew how to ride the trail better.

The girl threw a glance over her shoulder and saw Steve gaining on her. She yelled back at him in an unsteady voice.

"Pull up and go back or I'll shoot!" she yelled at him.

"Sorry, lady!" Steve called back at her. "I'm a-comin'!"

"I'll shoot!"

"Shoot away, ma'am!"

Steve kept gaining on her. The moonlight showed the shining nickeled barrel

of the gun in her hand. As his horse shortened the gap to not more than fifty feet, she turned. The gun in her hand spat flame. Steve felt the bullet nick his left arm but he didn't pull up. Nor did the girl shoot at him again.

Ahead and off the trail to the right showed the lights of the big barn where the breed dance was going on. The girl headed that direction, riding straight into the bunch of saddled horses at the edge of the clearing near the big barn. She flung herself from the saddle, leaving her saddled horse with the other mounts. And then she slipped inside the barn where the dance was going full swing.

Steve smiled grimly as he quit his horse and strode to the open door of the lantern-lit barn. His eyes searched the crowd. None of the girls he saw dancing could be the girl he'd chased here, but she must be somewhere inside. Then he grinned faintly.

Over near a corner by the fiddler's platform sat a girl whose tawny yellow hair looked strange among the black-haired breed girls. Her face was white under its tan. Her dark, black-fringed eyes saw Steve, and their glance, wide and scared, held a second, then slid away.

Steve hitched up his gun belt, removed his hat, then made his way along the wall to where the girl sat. He bowed stiffly from his waist. "Please, ma'am," he said gravely, "could I have the pleasure of dancin' this waltz with you?"

THE girl got slowly to her feet. Steve tossed his hat on the bench and taking her hand, encircled her slim waist with his right arm. As they waltzed past, the jovial slightly tipsy fiddler sighted them and called out to Steve in a loud, booming voice.

"By gar, you fotch de bes' gal, eh?"

Steve looked up and grinned widely. "I shore did."

The girl's hand trembled in his, cold as ice. Steve bent until her heavy, tawny hair was in his face. His voice was none too steady.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, if I scared you. I meant you no harm, honest. I don't know what you was doin' at camp. It's none of my business. I hope that gent didn't hurt you."

"No . . . . I'm not—not hurt. Now that you've caught me, what are you going to do with me?"

"Just what I'm doin' right now, as long as you'll let me—dance with you! What else would I want to do with the purtiest girl I ever sighted? Seems like I sort of earned a dance or two after beefin' that jasper back yonder at the Skillet camp. And gettin' shot up in the bargain."

"I—you mean I hit you when I shot? I didn't. I couldn't have hit you. Because I shot high so's I wouldn't hit your horse."

Steve chuckled. "If you was shootin' to miss, I hope I never cross your gun sights when you're actually tryin'."

The blood from the bullet nick had trickled down Steve's sleeve and wet his hand. And the girl's hand, clasped in his, was reddening with its stain. She saw it now and gave a little gasp of fright. She would have jerked her hand away but Steve held it tightly.

"If I don't mind, lady, you shouldn't. Anyhow it's just a scratch."

"Your shirt sleeve's all wet with it. You *are* hurt!"

"Have it your own way. If you'll sit out this next dance on the river bank with me, we might tie it up so's it won't soil your blouse. If you'll promise to dance every dance with me. You're the only palamino among all the black-manes here. The breed fellers have too polite manners to ask a buckskin-haired girl to dance, so I'm plumb safe in keepin' you all to myself. You're the best dancer I ever waltzed with. Do you know any of these folks?"

"Not one of them. I'm a stranger here."

"Me, too, ma'am. I reckon I shouldn't

have butted in, back there at the Skillet camp. Hornin' into lovers' quarrels is bad business and . . . . Hold on!"

For the girl had given a sharp, angry little *"Oh!"* and at the same instant jerked her hand free and slapped Steve across the mouth. The blood on her hand left a smeared mark on his face. Luckily nobody had noticed. The fiddle music had stopped. Steve and the girl had been near the door.

Steve took her almost roughly by the arm and hauled her outside.

"Now just why did you haul off and slam me thataway?" he demanded, half amused, half angry.

"Just what did you think I was doing in the Skillet bed-tent?" she flared back at him. Then her face crimsoned. "What else could you think?" she went on quickly. "You thought that all along! When you chased me here! When you danced with me! That's—why it's too horrible!"

"Hold on, lady! Don't bawl! Great gosh, I didn't really think you were bad. I don't know what fetched you to the Skillet camp alone at night. If you say it was all right, then I'll lick anybody that claims different. And we'll forget it."

"No we won't forget it or drop it like that. Listen, I was—I can't tell you what I was doing there. But I certainly didn't go there with any man. Or to meet any man. I was there to steal, if you want the truth. Do you believe that?"

"If you want me to," agreed Steve amiably, and didn't try to ask himself why he felt so elated over the fact that the yellow-haired girl was a thief, instead of some town girl, perhaps out on an indiscreet lark.

"You're not one of the regular Skillet cowboys," she said as they halted on a strip of sand-bar by the river's edge. "At least I never saw you before."

"I just hired out. Would you mind tellin' me your name?"

"Yes. I do mind. If you'll sit down and pull off your shirt, I'll try to get that blood stopped. Supposing you call me Mary. It's my name, even if nobody ever uses it on me. Yours is. . . . ?"

"Steve. If you'll just go behind that bush, I'll shed my shirt and tie this scratched arm up."

"Nonsense. Pull your shirt off. I'll help you. I've patched up some few bullet holes in my day, I'll have you know. Blood don't make me faint. And if you're modest, the shadows will hide our blushes. But I'll retire for a minute. I've a slip under this blouse that'll tear into clean strips of bandage."

Ten minutes later they sat on the bank of Milk River, Steve with his wounded arm wrapped in pale silk bandage and his flannel shirt on once more.

"I have to get back to town, Steve. You've acted mighty like a white man. You've had to accept me at my face value, sort of, and had to take my word for a lot of things. You've done a mighty fine job of it. Steve, if I told you that a man's honor, perhaps his life depended on it, would you promise to keep it a secret that you caught me at the Skillet camp? No matter what may come up? I give you my word of honor that your silence will be doing me the greatest favor possible. And it will be saving a man's honor and perhaps the lives of more than one man. Could you believe in me that much?"

"I reckon I could, lady. You bet I could, Mary. I think you're great. Gosh, you tied up my arm, and—

"—and slapped you and shot you to begin with, and may get you into trouble with Lige Brandon. Steve, how hard did you hit him, there in the tent? If you killed Lige Brandon, then—"

"Killed Lige Brandon? You mean it was Brandon I hit over the head?"

The girl nodded. "I'm afraid it was, Steve."

Steve grinned ruefully. "I stopped a while here at the dance on my way to

camp. He must have left town, then, right after I did. Rode straight on to camp—"

"And caught me red-handed as I was robbing his warsack. Steve, I swear to you I've done no real wrong. I had to do what I did. Now I have to get back to town before my dad misses me. Steve, you'll not tell until I have a chance to explain it all to you?"

"I won't tell, Mary."

They were standing now on the sandbar, facing one another. Her face was lifted a little so that the moonlight was on it, shining in her warm brown-flecked gray eyes.

"Steve, would you think I was common or cheap if I let you kiss me?"

"No, ma'am," blurted Steve clumsily.

"Then kiss me. And let me ride on to town alone."

CHAPTER THREE

A Ramrod Squares a Blood-Bargain

LIGE BRANDON squatted on his boot heels in the mess tent, sipping strong black coffee spiked with whiskey he'd poured from the cook's jug.

He felt gingerly of the knot above his left ear and looked hard at Steve Thompson.

"I thought I held aces, Steve," he grumbled, "and I did. That letter was in Deacon Moss's handwritin' and signed with his name and it was dated. It was sent to Hank Thompson and it asked Hank to meet him at Dodge City and settle the matter of the ownership of the Skillet brand and all the livestock in that iron. The date set for the meetin' is the exact date that Hank Thompson was seen ridin' into Dodge City, and one week before I reached Dodge with this trail herd I'm holdin' here now.

"Hank was seen ridin' into Dodge about dark that night. He put his horse in the barn. The barn man was the last man to see Hank alive. I got into Dodge a week later. Hank's horse was still in the barn. A dead body, so badly decomposed that only the clothes could be identified as Hank's, was found in the river ten days later. There's them that want to claim I killed Hank Thompson. You'll have to take my word for it now that I was down the trail with this herd the night Hank was killed.

"That letter was to be part of my alibi, backed up by the Skillet cowhands, if I was arrested and brought up fer trial. I found that letter in Hank's warsack. He'd put it there when he left us to ride on ahead to Dodge. Hank never told me or any of the boys why he was goin' on ahead to Dodge. I knowed he was bad worried over somethin'. He'd got in a stiff poker game with this feller Frank Webber in Forth Worth, and lost a-plenty. It was after we left Dodge that a feller stopped at camp.

"He told me that Frank Webber had bin shot and killed by his own son in Denver. You say you're that boy that killed Webber and I take your word for it. You show up here at Chinook and I don't need no more proof but your face that you're Hank Thompson's son. And the same night I ride here to this camp to meet you, I find somebody in the bed-tent. I sight the candle burnin' in the tent. Thinkin' it's one of the boys, I pay no never-minds to the light. Till it goes out sudden as whoever's in the tent hears me ride up. I grab somebody that's tryin' to crawl under the back of the tent that's pegged down. And damned if it ain't a female I got hold of. She lets out a holler. And about that time some feller charges in like a bull on the prod. I try to knock him cold. Instead, he beefs me. When I wake up, him and the female is gone. And that letter Deacon Moss wrote to Hank is likewise gone. And all I kin git outa my damn drunken grub-spoiler is that he was attacked by Injuns and he run off the

whole damn' war party with a butcher knife and would have had a bucket full of Sioux scalps only he was tommyhawked from behind . . . . I don't recollect you havin' no bunged-up arm and blood all over your shirt when I talked to you in town. Where'd you git hurt?"

"I had an accident, that's all, on the trail between here and town. You think Deacon Moss killed my father?"

"I'm accusin' nobody without I got proof to back what I say. I've knowed Deacon Moss for years and I know he's as fast with a gun as he is with a deck of cards. And barrin' this mess, as square with his dealin' of hot lead as he is with dealin' poker hands. He never used marked cards or a cold deck on no man. And every man he's killed, he's done so fair and square. If Frank Webber cold-decked Hank Thompson outa the Skillet brand, he done so without Deacon Moss's help. Deacon broke with Frank Webber just about the time of that Fort Worth stud game that Hank sat into. Neither of that gamblin' pair ever give out the reason for the split. And the reason 'most everybody 'lowed was the cause was Aces."

"Aces?"

LIGE BRANDON nodded, his mouth full of hot black coffee. "Yeah—the Deacon's kid. Though she's a kid no more but a growed lady and her right name is Mary. Deacon nicknamed her Aces when she was a yearlin' and it stuck. Frank Webber was a ladies' man, savvy, and Aces was growin' into as purty a lady as you'd find on the trail up from Texas. I seen her down at Fort Worth where she was goin' to school, walkin' along the street with the Deacon, hangin' onto his arm and him lookin' prouder than a king. Nobody blamed the Deacon for keepin' her outa Frank Webber's reach, for all he was old enough to be her daddy—her hair the color of gold in the sunlight, purty as a painted picture. And every inch a real quality lady, worshippin' her gambler daddy like he was the President of the United States. Mebbyso it was on her account that Deacon split with Frank Webber. Or mebbyso the poker game Webber set in with Hank Thompson had somethin' to do with it. There was that letter the Deacon wrote Hank."

"Was that before or after I killed Frank Webber in Denver?" asked Steve, hoping that his face wasn't as red as it felt.

"Before. Frank Webber wasn't killed till a couple of weeks after I'd come on up the trail from Dodge with the herd. I'd laid over at Dodge, not knowin' what had become of Hank. Then his body was found. The J Cross T herd come along about them. I asked Jay Turley what he thought I orter do. He 'lowed that the thing to do was to come on to Chinook with the Skillet herd. Which I done, directly after the funeral. Jay Turley's ornery as hell, some ways, but square as they make 'em, as you'll find out in the mornin'. Even if he has me arrested for the killin' of Hank Thompson, I'll still claim that. Damn' his ornery hide, he'd orter know me better than to suspect me of killin' Hank. But it shore looks like that's the way his mind is a-workin'.

"Another thing I can't figger out. I could be blindfolded and shoot at a man's hat on his head at that short distance and never come within three-four inches of his scalp. Hell, me and Jay Turley has bin doin' that off and on for years when we meet in town, and need new hats. It ain't no hard chore for a man that's ary kind of a shot. These hats is high crowned and we aim high so's to take no chances. Jay musta flinched. And afterwards he acted shore unpleasant about it. They're tellin' it now in Chinook that I tried to kill Jay Turley and make it look like it was accidental. And that ornery li'l ol' sawed off, bow-laiged Jay Cross Turley ain't a-sayin' a damn' word in my defense.

He's lettin' 'em think I tried to shoot him in the head—But that don't keep Jay Cross Turley from bein' the squarest cowman that ever come up the Texas trail. And I'll booger his eyes out in the mornin' when he cuts them hundred head of Skillet steers and you sign the name of Stephen Thompson to the bill of sale I'll hand him."

"If I sign it, that'll mean I'm claimin' the Skillet brand."

"And it'll bring out into the open ary man that holds ary claim on them cattle. Unless they swaller whatever paper they gof to show for their ownership. Which they won't if they've gone to the bother of killin' Hank Thompson to git a-holt of the Skillet iron."

"Does Jay Cross Turley figure that you'll put your name to the bill of sale, then? Is that where he'll accuse you of killin' Hank Thompson?"

"That's where and when Jay Cross Turley expects to tromp on me, son."

IN THE gray half-light of dawn Lige Brandon and Jay Cross Turley, riding into the herd together, began cutting out the hundred head of Skillet steers Turley was to select.

Every man in Chinook who owned or could beg, borrow or swipe a saddle horse had ridden out to look on. Some had even come in rigs. Most of them had been staying up all night drinking, so as to be on hand and in the proper mood to enjoy the show, because Chinook knew that there was more than just the cutting of a hundred head of longhorn steers to be seen. It was now an open secret that a showdown was coming, and the ownership of the Skillet iron was involved.

Out there on the bench above Milk River were two thousand head of steers in the Skillet iron, and no man wanted openly to claim ownership to the cattle because the former owner, Hank Thompson, had been murdered at Dodge City. Chinook, Montana, to its last man and woman, knew that Lige Brandon had been accused behind his back of Hank Thompson's murder, and that Jay Cross Turley was forcing a showdown when he cut the steers and demanded a bill of sale.

Lige Brandon had given Steve definite orders. Steve had believed Lige Brandon's story. He told the big red-haired trail-boss that, so far as he, Steve, was concerned, he'd back any play Lige wanted to make.

"I hired out to you in Chinook, Lige. You give the orders. I'll take 'em. If gun trouble starts, I'm with you."

Lige Brandon had given Steve a searching look, smiled faintly, and nodded. Steve, uncomfortable under the trail-boss's hard scrutiny, wondered if Lige could suspect him of being the man who had put that lump above the big man's ear. But Lige had asked no more questions. He'd asked once where Steve had gotten his arm hurt. Steve had given an evasive answer, but when the Skillet cowpunchers drifted to camp from town, Lige had introduced Steve to them.

"Boys, this is Steve Thompson, Hank's son. He's here to take over the Skillet herd and he's one of the outfit from here on. Until the sign comes right, Steve's kinda stayin' in the background, savvy? He'll come out to the herd when we go out to meet Jay Cross Turley. Keep Turley or ary J Cross man from gittin' close enough to Steve to see the likeness between him and Hank. Because as you kin see—barrin' the fact that Steve's towheaded instead of gray, and looks some younger—he's the spittin' image of Hank Thompson.

"I've sent one of the boys to town to tell Deacon Moss to be on hand when the cattle's cut because Deacon's sorta a referee. And the cowboy that goes to fetch the Deacon is goin' to pass out the news that Steve Webber, the cowpuncher that killed his daddy, Frank Webber, is

with the Skillet outfit. . . . Now don't flare up, Steve. I know what I'm doin'. Or anyhow I know I'm throwin' a little pitch pine kindlin' on the fire, just for the benefit of Deacon Moss and a feller named Cash Mitchell.

"Cash Mitchell is partners with Deacon Moss in the White Elephant Saloon and mebbyso partners with him in other deals. Cash Mitchell is bad medicine—treacherous and ornery. And he was almighty thick with Frank Webber."

"I met Cash Mitchell in town," said Steve. "I didn't tell him who I was. But he was rearin' to proposition me. Said he hadn't any love for Deacon Moss. I turned down his dicker, whatever it was goin' to be."

"Cash Mitchell is dangerous. And he don't fight alone. He has his pack of curly wolves somewhere within' hollerin' distance, always. He was run out of Dodge City by the law. Bat Masterson, the new Marshal of Dodge, had Cash Mitchell and Frank Webber on his blacklist. They drug it before Bat jailed 'em or killed 'em. Then Cash taken his gang of renegade toadies and come on to Chinook. Cash Mitchell was in Dodge when Hank was murdered. So was Frank Webber. So was Deacon Moss. Tally up your own score, Steve. I want that Cash Mitchell should be out there on the bench when we cut them cattle, knowin' that you're somewhere around, a-workin' for the Skillet."

Steve grinned. "Shoot the works, Lige!"

"Good boy. In a tight, when she comes, Cash Mitchell is your bear-meat. I'll handle Deacon Moss and Jay Cross Turley. I'll have plenty Skillet men backin' my play. And they'll likewise have an eye on Cash Mitchell's curly wolves. I figger that Deacon Moss or Cash Mitchell has a bill of sale for the Skillet outfit, signed by Hank Thompson. I'm forcin' their hand. There's goin' to be gun trouble out yonder on the Milk River Bench. Fork your ridge-runners, cowhands. Time we rattled our hocks."

They had reached the herd about the same time that Jay Cross Turley and his cowpunchers showed up, shadows in the first dim light of daybreak. Over the big branding corrals a quarter of a mile from where the Skillet herd was being held, showed the two score or more of men from town.

As Lige Brandon and Steve rode side by side in the lead of the Skillet men, Lige pointed his long arm.

"Yonder's Jay Cross Turley and his men. The Jay Cross men will hold the cut as me'n Jap top the herd of a hundred steers. You and the boys will hold the main herd. I'll ride on alone to meet Jay. Steve, I'm trustin' you. I never asked where your alibi was concernin' the date of Hank's disappearance. I taken it for granted you want to put in a claim for the Skillet brand. And I'm backin' your claim —in spite of the fact that you gimme this bump on the head and helped Aces Moss steal the letter that give me my clean alibi.

"In that tussle we had in the bed tent, you lost a hunk out of your shirt. I have the chunk I tore out and it matched the tear in the bloody shirt you wore back to camp. And Aces left me a few strands of her buckskin hair. Then the nighthawk sighted you dancin' with Aces Moss at the breed dance. Don't know as I blame you for gittin' kinda tangled in her rope, son. That's why I'm givin' you Cash Mitchell to chaw on fer bear-meat. You wouldn't want to be swappin' lead with Aces' daddy. No hard feelin's, Steve. And I'm trustin' you. Same as I'm trustin' Jay Cross Turley. Hank's son couldn't be wrong. Neither could Jay, who was Hank's closest friend. See yuh later, Steve. I'll deal you your hand when the big jackpot opens."

Lige Brandon stood in his stirrups and

rode off into the gray dawn humming tunelessly.

Now as the sky grew gradually lighter, Lige Brandon and Jay Cross Turley cut their steers, riding side by side into the herd. The Skillet cowboys held the herd and the J Cross men held the steers that were cut out.

"Tally ninety-nine!" called Jay Cross Turley, loud enough for the crowd of men from town to hear, over at the big corral where they sat their horses or perched on the top log of the corral waiting for the hundred head of steers to be corraled for branding into the J Cross iron.

"Tally ninety-nine!" repeated Lige Brandon.

Together the two men cut the last steer, and pulled up at the edge of the herd. Lige called out, waving his long arm.

"All right, Steve! Ride over here."

Steve rode up. Jay Turley was staring at him from under bushy black brows, staring as if he'd seen a ghost. Lige Brandon chuckled.

"If Steve Thompson signs your bill of sale, now, Jay—"

"Why, damn' your ugly hide, Lige!" growled Turley. "What kind of a joke are you playin' on a man? Who's this young feller?"

"Hank's son. And he's puttin' in his bid right here and now for the Skillet iron."

"Hank's son! Why didn't you tell a man? I ain't got a weak heart, but things is happenin' too fast for my constitution. I git set to play the only damn' job I ever put up on anybody and my batter gits spilled all to hell. I even go to the trouble of cuttin' my scalp with a razor so's I kin show blood to Deacon Moss and make him and Cash Mitchell think you're makin' a play for the Skillet iron and tried to kill me—"

"You mean my bullet didn't nick you, Jay? You mean you didn't flinch?"

"Flinch, hell! It was a job I was puttin' up on Deacon Moss and Cash Mitchell. Makin' 'em think I suspicioned you instead of them. I figgered that they, with Frank Webber, killed Hank. And I was damn' nigh right. Then who in hell should show up but—here he comes now. I found him at camp when I come from town."

A white-bearded man rode up, coming from the cut. Lige Brandon stared at him. Then he tried to say something and choked—because the white bearded man was staring at Steve.

"Who—who—?" The white bearded man's voice was a croaking whisper.

"He's yourn, Hank," gasped Lige Brandon. "Your own boy. Gawd knows where he's come from, Steve, but that's your daddy behind them Sandy Claws whiskers!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Guns of the Skillet Iron

THERE was a red sun rising as the J Cross and Skillet cowpunchers corraled a hundred head of steers. And riding behind, in the cloud of heavy yellow dust, were Jay Turley and Lige Brandon. Steve and Hank Thompson, both still a little dazed by their meeting, powdered with the yellow dust, rode with the Skillet and J Cross men, playing their parts as common hands.

Cash Mitchell and eight armed men sat their horses near the corral gate, while on the top log of the corral perched a lone, black-clad figure in a stovepipe hat. It was Deacon Moss, alone, playing a lone hand.

The corral gate swung shut on the cattle. Jay Turley and Lige Brandon pulled up apart from their men, not fifty feet from where Cash Mitchell and his men watched, their hands near their guns.

"There's your steers, Turley," grinned Lige Brandon.

"And they ain't worth a damn to me, Brandon, without a bill of sale."

"No need to git huffy, Jay. Here's your bill of sale. Made out legal and signed by the owner of the Skillet iron."

Lige handed Jay Turley a folded paper. Cash Mitchell rode up with his men.

"I'd like a look at that bill of sale for them steers, Turley," he said thickly, his right hand on his gun. "My partner Frank Webber won the Skillet outfit from Hank Thompson in a poker game at Fort Worth."

"Using," called down Deacon Moss, "a deck of cards marked so that anybody but a cowman like Hank Thompson might have read 'em."

"Damn you, Moss," Cash Mitchell looked up at the black-clad figure on the corral, "I told you this was my deal. Frank Webber was my partner. You got no cut a-comin' here. You broke with Frank on account of that poker game. You're out of this!"

"Even a spectator, Cash, retains the right of free speech. I grant the fact that you've a bill of sale, signed by Hank Thompson, giving you the ownership of the Skillet outfit. But I wonder if Frank thought to mention the fact that it was worthless — worthless and dangerous — when he sold it to you. Frank Webber won the Skillet outfit from Hank Thompson with a deck of marked cards. I played straight, honest poker with that tinhorn sport and won the outfit. Frank turned over that same bill of sale you have now, to me. I had it legally filed and ownership of the Skillet iron transferred to my daughter Mary. Frank Webber managed to steal the bill of sale that he later sold to you at Dodge. I made the theft possible, to give Frank Webber sufficient rope to hang himself and you with him. Your bill of sale, Cash, is worthless. So you see, Cash, it was hardly worth your while to murder Hank Thompson at Dodge to prevent Hank from trying to reclaim the outfit he'd lost to a crooked gambler. . . . Turley, down in your heart you're not suspecting your old friend Lige Brandon of killing Hank Thompson. Cash Mitchell's your—"

Deacon Moss sat motionless save for a slight turn of his head and a lightning-swift movement of his gun. The white handled six-shooter in the gambler's hand spat fire. And one of Cash Mitchell's hired gunmen, crouched back of a corral post the dirt, his smoking gun in his hand.

Steve had jumped his horse between Cash Mitchell and the corral.

"You want Steve Webber, Mitchell!" he yelled. "Let's go!"

The bullet that Cash Mitchell had meant for Moss crashed through Steve's right shoulder. Steve's gun missed, slipped from his hand as the nerves in his arm were suddenly paralyzed.

BEFORE Cash Mitchell could thumb back the hammer of his gun, Deacon Moss' and Hank Thompson's guns spat flame at the same split-second. Both bullets struck Mitchell in the heart.

At that same instant Lige Brandon and Jay Cross Turley were shooting. And Mitchell's gun toters were being knocked from their saddles whenever the guns of the cowmen roared.

It was over in less than two minutes. Cash Mitchell lay dead. Three of his men were dead, the rest badly wounded. Steve was the only man on the other side of the fight that had been hit.

"And I promised Aces," said Deacon Moss, "that I'd see to it that a tow-headed cowpuncher they called Steve didn't get hurt," he said, lifting the young cowpuncher from his saddle. "You stopped the bullet that Cash had my name on," he went on, "when you jumped your horse into the line of fire. You may be the Steve Webber that's supposed to be with the Skillet outfit. But you look like Hank Thompson to me. All of which bears out

something that Frank Webber let slip one night when he was drunk. That Hank Thompson had a son that thought his name was Steve Webber. Which is why I had a legal document drawn up at Dodge City, turning the Skillet iron over to my daughter Mary with the provision that she locate this Steve Webber and if he turned out to be Hank Thompson's son, he was to be given the brand and all the livestock in that brand. When Aces said she'd danced with a cowpuncher named Steve, that this Steve had helped her out of a tight, I began to wonder just how Fate was stacking the cards on us."

As Deacon Moss made Steve sit down on the ground and began cutting away the cowpuncher's bloody shirt with his pocket knife, he smiled at the pale pink silk bandage on Steve's arm. Steve grinned faintly at the gambler.

"She shot high, to miss my horse."

"So she told me. Aces is scared of guns and hates cards. She couldn't hit the inside of the proverbial barn. And the only card game she knows is solitaire and gets mixed up playing that. I'm proud of both facts. Steady, Steve, and I'll have that bullet out. You got a son here, Hank."

Hank Thompson nodded. "Thought for a second there that I'd found me a son and lost him all in ten minutes time. But us Thompsons are hard to kill. Cash Mitchell and Frank Webber mighty near turned the trick when they bushwhacked me at Dodge and throwed what they thought was my dead carcass in the river. But the water kind of fetched me around, I shed most of my clothes, crawled back on shore and made it to the doctor's house. He patched me up; hid me out.

"When I got able to make the ride, I come on up the trail. Got here last night. Rode to Jay's camp, mistakin' it for the Skillet camp. Jay told me the news and I got in on the big showdown. I'm kinda weak, but a few days' gittin' acquainted with Steve here will fix me up. You work like a professional sawbones, Deacon."

"I was one, once. But there was more money in cards than pills and scalpels. . . . That'll hold you till we get to town, Steve. Aces will take over the job there. She owes it to you, saving her from being grabbed for a sneak-thief prowler. Lige don't be too hard on the youngster. She heard me tell that Dodge City lawyer when we were fixing up the Skillet papers that unless you'd destroyed it, I'd written Hank a letter that might be termed as incriminating. I'd written Hank to meet me in Dodge to get the ownership of the Skillet outfit straightened up. I'd won it back from Frank Webber and aimed to give it back to him with perhaps a lecture on gambling. Hank never met me that night. I was in Dodge to meet him. That letter could have made it tough for me. Aces overheard, and turned burglar. And yonder she comes now riding like a drunk Injun!"

Deacon Moss propped Steve's back against a saddle and blanket somebody had taken off a horse.

"Hank, supposing we turn Steve over to Aces. She can take him on to the doctor at Chinook."

"I'll go along," said Hank Thompson, "But the Skillet don't belong to me no more. It's Steve's. Steve won't gamble 'er away. Not if that Aces youngster has ary say-so about their outfit."

"Don't look yet," whispered Lige Brandon as they rounded the corner of the corral, "but I just seen Aces quit her hoss like a pony express rider. And she landed square alongside Steve. I couldn't make out if she was bawlin' or laughin', or doin' both simultaneous. There should be a bottle in that crowd of cowhands. And this calls for a drink. Turn them dogies out, cowhands! All bets're off, and we're goin' to town. It's gonna be rainin' cowboys in Chinook tonight!"

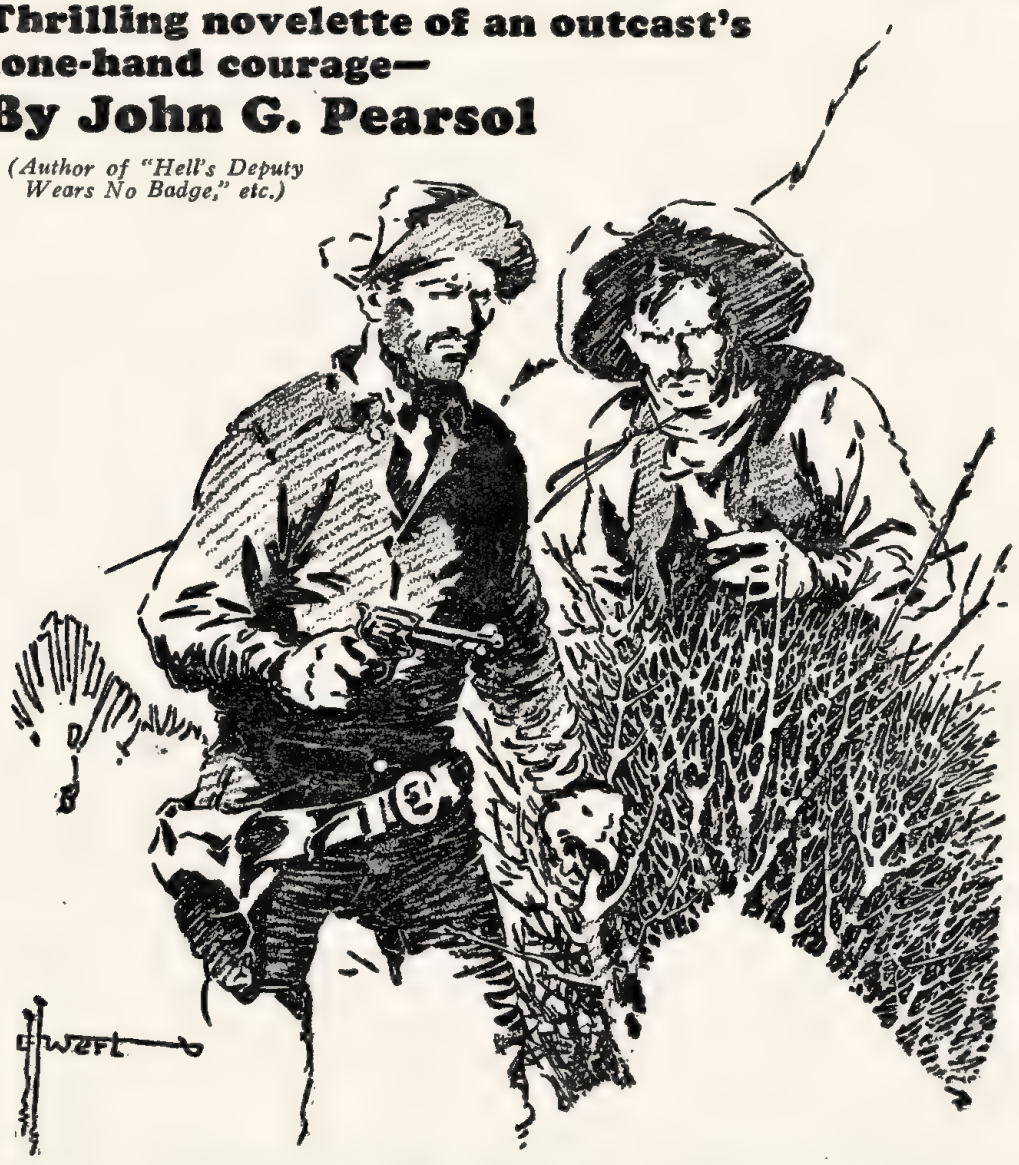
THE END

COWMAN BAIT FOR

Thrilling novelette of an outcast's lone-hand courage—

By John G. Pearsol

(Author of "Hell's Deputy Wears No Badge," etc.)



Utterly, hopelessly trapped; his body a bullet-riddled blood-stained shell, his name damned alike by his neighbors and by grim cow-country law, Jim Fannin saw no use of fighting on against those heartbreaking odds. . . . Yet he must live long enough to insure a measure of peace to the troubled soul of an honest cowman who had kept his faith beyond the grave!

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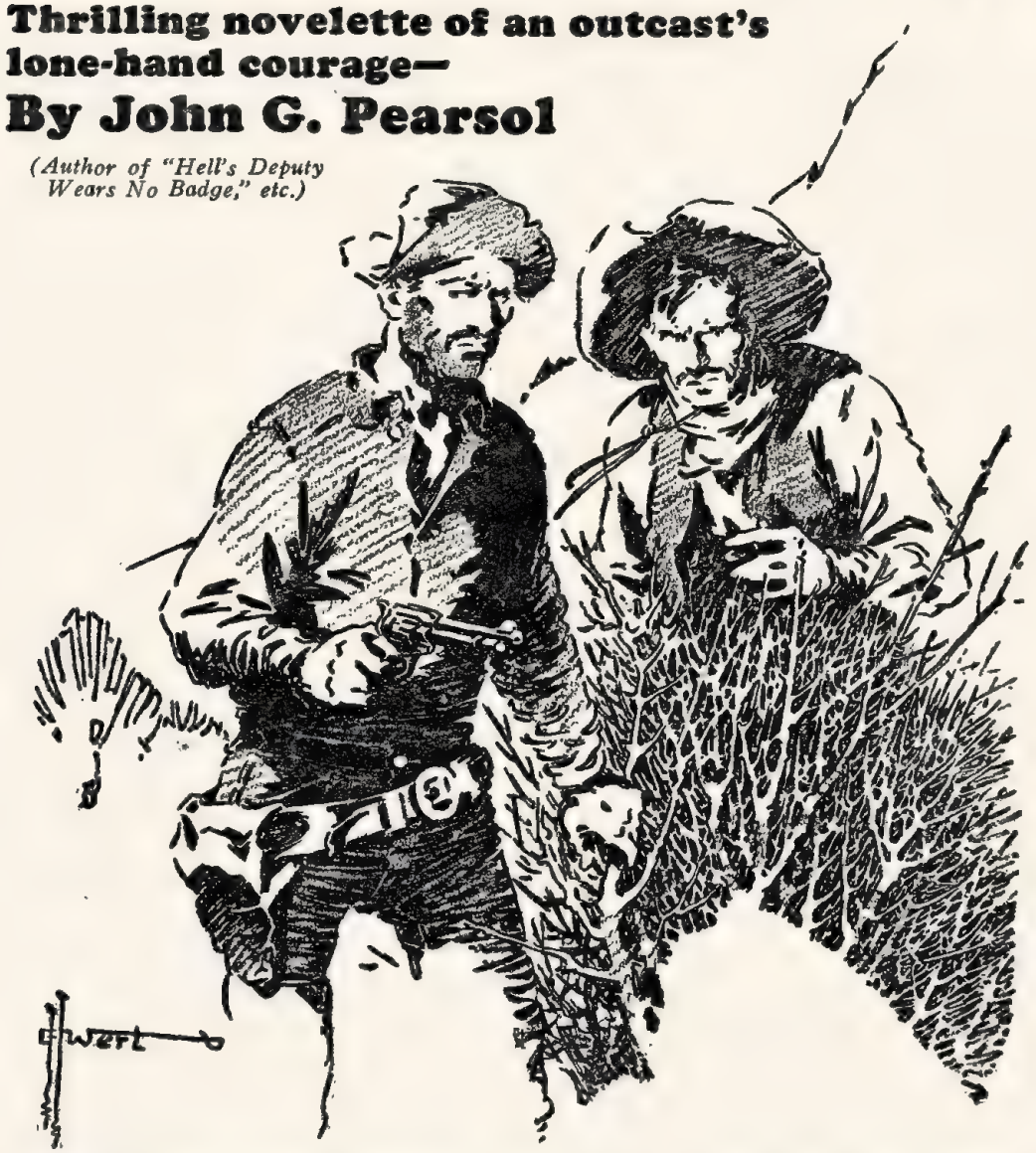
COWMAN BAIT FOR A GUN-WOLF'S TRAP

Thrilling novelette of an outcast's lone-hand courage—

By John G. Pearsol

(Author of "Hell's Deputy Wears No Badge," etc.)



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Through the bank window the wizened, bent-over form of old Bemis, Piute City's banker, could be seen. As usual, he was working on the bank books on this last night of the month.

A GUN-WOLF'S TRAP

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Bemis sighed, closed a big ledger, then reached out to a stack of money beside him and broke the seal on one of the packages. It was a package of brand new, crisp twenty dollar bills, and Bemis took one of them and inserted it in a stack of old twenties. He counted down a few more bills in the stack of old ones and inserted another new one. He kept on doing that till the package of new bills were spaced down in the stack of old ones. Then he reached out to break the band on another packet of new twenties.

Then Bemis' hand froze just above the stack of new money.

A slight squeak sounded in the room, like the squeak of a loose board in the floor. A cold chill raced up Bemis' spine. Slowly, he started to ease his hand back, reaching for the gun that lay in the drawer just in front of his lean stomach. But his hand stopped as a voice came out of the shadows at the far side of the dimly lit room.

"Don't raise your hands," the voice said softly. "Keep 'em still. Don't move a muscle. I've got a gun on you!"

Bemis let his hands rest tight on the counter. The voice came again. "There's a canvas sack beside you. Start putting the money in it. Fill it up!"

Bemis reached out and started cramming the bills in the mouth of the sack that had Piute City Bank printed on its face. He put all the old money in it. Then he stopped.

"Go ahead," said the voice again. "Fill it up. That other stack over there—the stack with the pretty bands on it."

Bemis still hesitated. Beads of sweat stood out on his brow. He started to speak, then closed his mouth. His hands trembled as he put the bundles of new twenty dollar bills in on top of the old money. He finished, and sat there on the stool with the sack in his hands.

"Now walk slow over this way," came the voice again. "Make it natural, like you'd walk if you was going to put that money in the safe. Just in case anybody's outside watching, make it so they won't suspect anything. You'll die the minute you make a false move!"

BEMIS' legs shook as he went over toward the shadows, the sack in his hands. He saw the glitter of the gun in the fellow's hand. A bandana handkerchief covered the lower part of the man's face. He was dressed in black and wore a big black hat. He had a pin in his shirt front that glittered in the faint light. It was a brilliant-studded pin of horseshoe design that held his shirt together at the throat.

Bemis stopped, held out the sack with his shaking hands. The bandit took the sack, then looked keenly at Bemis. Bemis' eyes were fastened on that brilliant-studded horseshoe pin, flashing there in the dim light. The bandit reached up, felt of it and pulled it out of his shirt. He thrust it toward his pocket and backed away. Then he was lost in the darkness, and Bemis stood there, sweat-drenched.

He looked down at his feet and the glittering blaze of brilliants flashed up at him from the floor, from the pin the bandit had taken from his shirt and tried to put in his pocket.

The pound of hoofs sounded in front of the bank. A shot, and then a yell came in to Bemis as he stood there, indecision and fear written on his face.

A violent rattling and pounding came to the front door of the bank and Bemis went to open it. He still held the pin in his hand that he picked up off the floor. He opened the door and looked at Sheriff Rawls there in the doorway, a gun in his hand.

"I just happened by," Rawls said calmly to Bemis. "A fellow come hellin' around the bank. He had a bandana pulled up over his face and a sack in his hand. I yelled and he run. Then I shot. You been robbed?"

Bemis licked his lips and nodded. He had to admit that he'd been robbed, even if he didn't want to. And he didn't want to admit it, because of those new twenty-dollar bills. Suddenly he thought of the pin in his hand and tried to put it behind him; but the sheriff looked down and saw it.

He reached out and took it out of Bemis' hand. "What are you doing with this?" he asked. "That's Jim Fannin's pin, and damned if that didn't look like Jim Fannin on that horse! Was it Jim Fannin?"

Bemis thought of the new twenties again. He'd rather lose all the money he had than have those new twenties found. There were so many of them that he'd been mixing with his good money to get rid of gradually, all counterfeit, and with the bank bands on them. If they got around he'd be ruined. But the sheriff had said it looked like Fannin, and it *had* looked like Fannin. The sheriff would arrest Fannin anyway now. . . .

"It looked like him," Bemis admitted finally. "He had this pin in his shirt. He took it out and tried to put it in his pocket when I looked at it. But he dropped it on the floor."

The sheriff whirled and went out. The pound of hoofs came again as a posse galloped out of town, and Bemis stood there and wiped the sweat off his brow. Some way, somehow, after Fannin was caught, he'd have to keep them from examining that money!

YOUNG Jim Fannin rode slowly along the trail to his little homestead ranch in the hills. It was late, and the moon hung low over the peaks, making the huge cottonwood beside the trail a black, gaunt skeleton against the gray sky.

That skeleton-like tree was the marker for the grave of Jim Fannin's father. It stood on the edge of Fannin's ranch and was where old Bill Fannin had said he had wanted to be buried when he died. But Jim Fannin hated to go past that tree because it reminded him of the one hellish thing that had happened in his life; the thing that seemed to have changed everything. His father, buried there, had been killed while attempting to rob a bank.

According to Bemis, the banker, old Bill Fannin had come into the bank while Bemis was alone. Bemis had always claimed that Bill pointed a gun at him and demanded money. The banker had given the money to Bill Fannin, then shot and killed him as he made his way toward the door. As proof, Bemis had pointed to Bill Fannin's gun on the floor, then he'd reached into Fannin's pocket and produced over three thousand dollars in big bills.

Nobody could dispute evidence like that, but it seemed hazy to Jim Fannin. The Fannin's had been poor; been in bad shape financially. But somehow, Jim could not conceive of his father robbing a bank. He couldn't think it possible. The evidence, however, had been conclusive. The gun was there; the money was there. . . .

That attempted robbery had smashed hell out of young Jim Fannin. He'd lost more than his father when that happened, for he'd lost all his hope of a future. Now, with that behind him, he couldn't ask Della Hayden to marry him. He was almost an outcast in Piute City.

He lived by himself. He had no friends, or if he had he left them alone because he knew his association with them would put them in bad light with the rest of the folks in Piute City. That was the reason he hadn't seen Della in more than a year. She had told him that it made no difference, but Jim wouldn't listen to it. Bitterly, he knew it did make a difference. . . .

Jim Fannin raised his hand up to his shirt front as he passed that tree. The horseshoe pin which had belonged to his father, and which he always wore in his shirt front was gone. It was his habit

always to touch it when he passed the tree where his father lay buried. The pin was the only personal thing that Jim Fannin possessed that had belonged to old Bill. Even Bill's guns had been kept by the sheriff, and Jim never asked for them. Jim never mentioned Bill Fannin to anybody.

Jim Fannin guessed he must have lost the pin when he was in Piute City. He turned his bronc and thought of going back to look for it. Then he remembered that it was late. The store, the only place he'd been in town, would be closed. He'd get it the next time he went in. Everybody knew that pin. They'd save it for him if it was found.

Jim Fannin started on again. The night was still. A coyote started a hysterical yammer off in the hills and stopped suddenly, as though it had been choked. Jim wondered what had frightened it. Then he heard the new sound, the violent drumming of hoofs, the sound of a horse coming down the trail to beat the devil. Jim Fannin edged his horse off the trail and waited.

A rider speared around the bend, thundering toward Jim Fannin before Jim was well off the trail. The rider sighted Jim and pulled hard on his reins. A gun glinted in his hand and a flash of fire leaped out of the darkness toward Jim. A bullet brushed past his cheek. He whirled his bronc and tried to get behind a mesquite tree while he called out to that crazy hombre in the trail, but the rider's gun was bellowing again.

Jim Fannin's own gun came out. The fire of it blinded Jim for a moment when he shot. Then he peered through the darkness and saw a crumpled form out there; and a riderless horse galloping back along the trail.

Jim Fannin inched his horse toward that still form. He stopped and dismounted. He did not know the dead man whom he turned over. He was dressed in black, like Jim Fannin always dressed. His black hat was thrown from his head and his gun was lying beside him. A canvas sack with the name of the Piute City Bank printed on it lay near his outstretched left hand.

Jim picked up the sack and looked in at the bundles of money. He had run into a bank robber, he knew now.

He mounted and started back toward Piute City, but pulled off the trail again as he heard another thunder of hoofs. He guessed that would be a posse, but he'd had enough of being shot at. That posse would be looking for a bank robber on the trail. They'd shoot first and ask questions afterwards. It would be better to let them find the dead man before he hailed them.

From the brush, Jim Fannin watched them stop when they saw the sprawled form in the trail. Their voices came clearly to Fannin as he sat there in the darkness.

"Jim Fannin met him and killed him, maybe. . . ."

Just on the point of calling out to them, Jim Fannin stopped and wondered why they had mentioned his name. How did they know he was on this trail?

"Jim's going from bad to worse. The old man was bad, an' Jim always was dynamite. But I never thought he'd try bank robbing after the lesson his old man had."

Bank robbing! What the hell?

Jim Fannin looked down at the sack in his hand. He smiled bitterly as the force of this set of circumstances came home to him. So they had him tagged as a bank robber! And if he rode out there now, with that bank sack in his hand. . . .

The posse mounted and thundered on toward Jim Fannin's ranch. Jim sat there and thought for a while. But the more he thought, the more confused he became. He was finished here in Piute City, he guessed. His name was bad; his father had been killed while robbing a bank. He

couldn't live that down. For an instant he thought of taking the money and going away. Then he knew he couldn't do that. He could probably escape the law, but he'd never be able to run away from himself. If he took the money he would be a thief, just as much as if he had robbed the bank.

Jim Fannin turned and rode slowly up to the hills. There he put the money beneath a flat rock. It was a cinch he'd been framed, if not intentionally by some one, at least by circumstance. But maybe the circumstances were not sufficiently positive to convict him, if he did not have the money with him. Maybe there'd be a way out of this.

He covered the money over with rocks, then headed back toward the ranch. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Girl for a Gunman

JIM FANNIN circled in the heavy, moonless darkness and rode down the slope toward his little cabin on the flat. He dismounted, unsaddled and put his bronc in the corral. Jim entered the house, went to the table to one side of the room, and found the lamp. He struck a match and lit it.

He knew someone was in the room, he sensed there was a man behind him. He had really expected someone to be there watching for him. So he acted naturally, just because he hoped that this evidence that had made them think that Jim Fannin was a bank robber might not be too conclusive. Maybe there was a flaw in it somewhere.

"Stand still, Fannin," a voice said behind him. "Don't move your hands."

Jim stood still. He felt his guns being lifted from their holsters. Then he turned around and looked at Sheriff Rawls.

It was hard to keep the bitterness out of his eyes and his voice, hard to keep from letting Rawls know that he knew there was a frame-up. But he managed it, somehow.

"What's wrong?" he asked Rawls. "Why the gun in my belly, Rawls?"

"To keep you from getting foolish, Fannin," said Rawls. "You already killed one man tonight. I don't want to give you a chance with me."

"I killed a man?"

"You killed a man and robbed the bank," said the sheriff. "Much as I hate to think it, I believe you did it. You opened the door to the bank and sneaked in on old Bemis. You stole the bank money and dropped your horseshoe pin on the floor as you took it out of your shirt when you saw that Bemis was looking at it. You came out the trail to your ranch, and ran into somebody out here about ten miles along. You killed him because you was afraid he'd be able to swear he'd seen you coming down the trail. That's just as plain as if it was already proved on you, Jim."

Rawls clicked open the loading gate of one of Jim's guns, spun the cylinder and looked at the fired shell. He smelled the barrel and his lips turned down.

"I'm sorry you went to the trouble of unsaddling your horse. Go saddle it again. You're going to jail."

Jim Fannin rose and went outside with Rawls' gun in his back. So that was where the pin had gone! The black-dressed gent had found it, or stolen it, then he'd dropped it purposely to put the blame of the bank robbery on Jim Fannin.

Jim saddled his horse and started up the trail with Rawls. But somehow, as he rode along, that pin thing didn't click. That man on the trail was a total stranger to Jim Fannin. If he was leaving the country, if he didn't know Jim Fannin, why would he go to the trouble of framing him? That part of it wasn't logical. If somebody who knew and hated Jim Fannin had done that. . . . If somebody in

Piute City had done it, somebody who hated Jim Fannin, and had to keep living in Piute City—it would be logical then. So, Jim figured, there must be somebody else mixed up in it—somebody in Piute City who knew that that horseshoe pin would immediately tie up Jim with a bank robbery. A stranger in Piute City wouldn't know that. . . .

"You didn't have the money when you came home," said Rawls, as they rode along. "I watched you when you rode up. You hid it somewhere before you got here. We can pick it up as we go along. Where is it, Fannin?"

Jim Fannin thought of the pin again. Whoever was in the robbery with the man Jim had killed, would be looking for that money. They'd want their split of it. Maybe there was a way to lure this gent into the open.

"I killed the man on the trail, Rawls," Jim Fannin told the sheriff, "but I didn't rob the bank. I lost my pin in town. This bank robber evidently picked it up and used it to put the deadwood on me. I heard him coming down the trail and stopped. He shot at me twice and I shot back. I killed him, but he didn't have any bank money on him when I got to him. Maybe he hid it some place."

Rawls snorted. "That's your story, and you'll stick to it, I suppose," he said sarcastically.

"I'll stick to it till the cows come home," said Jim Fannin. And he would stick to it. He'd stick to it because he knew that if somebody had tried to frame him, that man would know that the dark-dressed bank robber he had killed on the trail *did* have the bank money on him. He'd know that Jim Fannin told the truth when he said he had killed the robber, and know that Jim Fannin told a lie when he said he had no bank money on him. And knowing that, this mysterious gent might do foolish things. . .

They rode along and the sheriff talked some more. "It'll go easier with you if you tell where that bank money's hid," he kept saying. "You'll get the limit if you don't."

But Jim Fannin paid no attention. Somebody who had known him had framed him. Somebody who hated him. And who hated him? Who hated him more than anybody? Just one man that Jim Fannin knew, and that man was Mel Parker, owner of the big Silver Concho saloon.

Mel Parker, Jim reflected, wasn't doing so well now, with the law cracking down on the gambling halls and the honkytonks. Mel Parker wasn't as wealthy as he had been when his games were crooked; when he could cheat anybody at will with his wired wheels. Not that anybody ever proved they were crooked. But after a lot of punchers complained that they had lost money a lot too regularly at Parker's Silver Concho, the law closed him up. He opened again, and hadn't been very prosperous ever since.

This Mel Parker hated Jim Fannin for two reasons: he hated him because Jim Fannin had slapped his face in public and dared him to go for his gun, because Mel Parker had mentioned Della Hayden's name in the saloon. And Mel Parker hated Jim Fannin still more, because Parker wanted to marry Della Hayden, and he knew damn well that Della Hayden was in love with Jim Fannin. Even if Della and Jim never saw each other any more, everybody knew that was so. Maybe Parker figured that framing a bank robbery on Jim Fannin would get him out of the way, and put money in his own pocket at the same time. . . .

A FAINT gray came to the eastern sky as they rode into Piute City. A dog barked at them as they moved like gray ghosts up the deserted street. They passed the little white house where Della Hayden lived all alone since her mother

had died, and they came to the lunchroom where she worked, waiting table.

Better to wait table and have a good name than to marry Jim Fannin and have the name borne by a bank robber, Jim had told her, and now he thanked the Lord that he'd been stubborn about that. She'd be brokenhearted now, but she would have felt a lot worse if they had gotten married. . . .

The cell door clanged shut behind Jim Fannin. The sheriff marched up the corridor and Jim Fannin lay down on the cot. He was tired, weary of mind mostly. The ghastly irony of it all appalled him—old Bill having been killed as a bank robber though Jim knew that his father had never stolen a dime in his life. And that thing of his dead father clutching a twenty-dollar bill in the hand which—so they had said—had held a gun in his last minute of life. That was funny as hell to Jim Fannin. But now Jim was framed by evidence so air-tight that they'd send him up, sure as the devil. Now it wasn't so hard to think that old Bill was innocent. Bill had had money in his pockets, but Jim Fannin had had a bank sack in his possession. And Jim couldn't find a way out of his own trap, any more than he could figure how old Bill could have been framed. It was hopeless. . . .

With morning the sheriff looked in through the bars of the door. "I'm giving you one last chance," he said. "Where did you hide that money?"

"One last chance for what?" asked Jim Fannin bitterly.

"One last chance to save your life," said Rawls. "If you dig up the money, the prosecutin' attorney says he'll prosecute you for bank robbery alone. If you don't dig it up, he'll prosecute you both for murder and robbery. He'll press a charge against you for killing that fellow out there on the trail, and he won't have a hell of time making it stick. I guess you realize that, don't you?"

Jim Fannin nodded. He guessed they could make most anything stick against him now. But the bitterness rose up within him when he looked at Rawls. He hadn't done a dishonest thing in his life, but just the same he'd lost Della, lost all his friends and everything he ever hoped to have. Now they wanted to scare him into digging up the money.

A blaze of fiery resentment glowed in Jim Fannin's eyes. Rawls was threatening him, taunting him, with his life as bait. To hell with his life! It didn't amount to a damn anyway!

"You go plumb to hell, Rawls. You and everybody else in this town," said Jim Fannin coldly. "I told you most of the truth out there. I didn't rob the bank, and I did lose my pin. But the jasper that did rob it still had the money on him after I shot him. I found it and I hid it. I hid it where you'll never find it. At least I'll have that one satisfaction. Now stretch my neck, and be damned to you!"

The sheriff left and Jim Fannin rested on his cot. He looked at the steel bars and listened to the talk that drifted into his cell from the sidewalk outside the jail. They were remembering everything that had happened in the lives of old Bill Fannin and young Jim. They remembered that old Bill had killed a couple of men. That was evidence that he was bad, they said. They retold the story of old Bill attempting to rob the bank. Like father, like son, they said. Young Jim started out like old Bill started out. Young Jim killed a couple of men, too. He had no respect for the law. He killed. Then he robbed. Those folks out there convicted him, had him damned and sent to jail before the sun was high.

Noon came. The jailer brought food, sliding it in to Jim on a little tin plate, and then he left. Then the sheriff came and he had somebody with him.

Jim Fannin looked up and his heart beat high again. There was Della, her

golden hair gleaming in the light that came in through the window, her blue eyes smiling, her lips slightly parted as she looked at Jim.

"You can have fifteen minutes, Della," Rawls told her.

Jim Fannin rose. Della Hayden reached her hands through the bars and found Jim Fannin's hands. She pressed them and smiled again. And Jim guessed that this, this fifteen minutes with Della, would be worth anything. Just to know that she was still the same. Just to know that she didn't give a damn what they said or what they proved. Right or wrong, she was still for him.

"You didn't do it, did you, Jim?" she asked.

"No, Della, I didn't."

She smiled again, satisfied. She believed him. She didn't even ask him how it happened. Just his word was all she needed.

CHAPTER THREE

While the Hangnoose Waits

IT SEEMED a long time then that Jim Fannin stood there looking at her, just drinking in her sweetness and nearness which had been denied him ever since old Bill had been killed.

"The sheriff says you admitted you had the money," Della said after a while. "But you told him to go to hell. You told him you'd never tell where it was."

"That's right," said Fannin. I have it hid."

He told her how it happened, about the man on the trail, about losing his horseshoe pin.

"And I told Rawls to go to hell because they won't give a man a chance," Jim Fannin went on bitterly. "They convicted me at the first chance they got, so I thought at least I'd have the satisfaction of making them lose that. But I see now that I was wrong. I'll tell them where the money is, then if they send me up there'll be nothing I'll have to look back on with shame. I'll know I did all I could to go straight and be straight. I'll know it, and you'll know it. And when they say you were going to marry a crook, Della, you'll know they lie, even if you won't be able to prove it."

"You don't need to tell them where the money is to make me know that, Jim," said Della softly. "I'd have married you last year. I'll marry you now. I don't love you because somebody else thinks you're good, or because they think you're bad. I love you because you're you, Jim, whether you're good or bad or right or wrong!"

Jim Fannin smiled softly. "I guess it was just the thoughts of you that kept me up this past year," he said. "And it's the glory of you now, that makes me see the right thing to do. When you go out, tell Rawls that I'm ready to tell him where the money is. If you don't see Rawls, tell Bemis, for maybe Rawls will be in the saloon, and I'd rather you didn't go in there. If you tell Bemis, he'll get word to Rawls."

"I'll tell one of them," promised Della Hayden.

She pressed her face up close to the door, and their lips met through the bars. Then the tap of the girl's high heels clicked sharply on the jail corridor as she went out. Jim Fannin, at the window, watched Della go down the street and enter the bank. He saw her come out again and go on down the street until she was lost to his sight.

Bemis came out of the bank. He came up the street and Jim Fannin expected him to go into the saloon to see Rawls and tell him that Jim Fannin was ready to talk. But Bemis didn't go into the bank. He came on up toward the jail, and Jim Fannin figured that was just as good. Maybe Bemis was anxious to hear where his money was hidden. He'd be anxious to get it back. . . .

But Bemis turned down an alley before he came to the jail. Jim Fannin frowned and wondered if maybe Rawls was down there somewhere and Bemis was going after him. Bemis appeared to be in a hurry. He'd been walking fast. . . .

JIM FANNIN waited, his face pressed against the iron window bars. He waited five minutes, and still neither Bemis nor Rawls came. If Bemis couldn't find Rawls he'd come himself. What was delaying him?

Only subconsciously was Jim Fannin aware that a reddish spot of color glowed for a second in the semi-darkness of the paneless window in a deserted 'dobe across the street from the jail. Only dimly did he realize that a clanging report charged out into the noonday silence. Then a million flashing stars seemed to explode in Jim Fannin's brain. The walls of the world seemed to close in about him as he staggered back from the window, a stream of blood flowing down from a ragged wound in the side of his head. He fell on the floor, but did not know that he hit it. He didn't know that the door of his cell was unlocked; that Della and Rawls and Bemis and Mel Parker and a crowd of other people pushed their way down the corridor to look at him. . . .

Jim Fannin opened his eyes and looked up at Doc Carson, the saw-bones of Piute City. He was going to ask what happened, then he remembered. He'd been standing at the window and Bemis had gone down the side street. He'd been waiting for Bemis and Rawls and then he'd been shot.

But who had shot him? Why? Was there any connection with his being shot and the fact that he had been going to tell where the money was hidden?

Jim Fannin couldn't see why anybody would want the hiding place of the money to remain a secret. Even the man who had originally framed him, who had been in with that fellow out there on the trail, would want Jim Fannin to tell Rawls where the money was. He would want Jim Fannin to tell *him* where it was. That man wouldn't shoot Jim Fannin.

"You'll be okay in a little while," said Doc Carson. "Just a crease."

"Do you know who shot you?" asked Rawls. "Did you see anybody?"

Jim Fannin looked at the circle of faces. Bemis was peering at him expectantly and Jim saw the fear in Bemis' eyes. He looked at Mel Parker and Mel Parker was only curious. Jim Fannin shook his head.

"I didn't see anybody," he said weakly. "I don't have any idea who shot me."

He looked at Bemis again and Bemis looked relieved. Mel Parker kept watching Jim Fannin and Rawls kept watching him.

"About the money, Jim?" Rawls asked: "Bemis said you sent word with Della that you'd tell where it is. Where is it?"

Jim Fannin looked from Mel Parker to Bemis, and that almost unseen flicker of fear was in Bemis' eyes again, trying to hide itself behind the forced calm on Bemis' face. So Bemis didn't want Jim Fannin to tell where that money was. He was afraid to have Jim Fannin tell where it was. Jim knew that now. He could see it, he could feel it. He looked at Mel Parker, but there seemed to be a sort of set resignation on the saloon man's white face. Mel Parker didn't want Jim Fannin to tell, either, but Mel Parker wasn't afraid.

On a sudden hunch Jim Fannin shook his head again. "I've changed my mind," he said. "If you want the money, try to find it!"

THE sheriff shooed the rest of the people out of the cell, then clanged the door shut angrily behind him. Jim Fannin lay there, a great weakness pressing down on him from the shock of the bullet.

Jim Fannin was dizzy, but he could think clearly. He saw again the fear in Bemis' eyes and the forced mask of indifference on Mel Parker's face. Then Bemis, afraid he'd tell where the money was hidden, was the logical man to suspect of shooting him. Jim Fannin couldn't think of any reason for Bemis' being afraid Jim would tell where the money was hidden, but he had been afraid. And that was that. . . .

And Mel Parker. Mel Parker was more interested than the sheriff had been in where the money was, in whether or not Jim Fannin was going to tell where he put it. The fact that Mel Parker had tried not to show that he was interested made Jim Fannin know that Parker was mixed in it.

Maybe Mel Parker was associated with the gent who had worn the horseshoe pin. Maybe Mel Parker had hired this black-dressed gent to rob the bank and was waiting for a chance to get to Jim Fannin to try to discover where Jim had put the money.

But there was nothing positive about any of it. Jim lay there and thought about it and a grim smile came to his lips. Here, at least, was something to work on. Here was a chance to fight. Here was a different set-up than when Jim Fannin had meekly let Rawls lead him into a cell and lock him up.

Jim rose and circled his cell. If he was out he might lure Mel Parker into the open. If he had his freedom he might bait a trap for Bemis.

Jim tried the bars of his window, but they were solid. He fished in his pockets for a key that might turn the heavy lock on his cell door, but his pockets were empty. He sat down on the cot again and watched the patch of sunlight creep slowly across the floor, then up to the cell door. He watched that patch of sunlight turn from gold to pink, then to a crimson hue that faded out into the gray of dusk.

Jim Fannin rose and paced, like a caged animal, about his cell again. Freedom! If he was free he could fight. If he was free he might clear his name. If he was free he might be able to even do something about the besmirched name of old Bill Fannin.

A drunk groaned across the corridor. Bootheels scuffed on the hard floor. In the dim light Jim Fannin saw a form in the cell across the hallway.

"Is that you, Jim Fannin?" asked the drunk in the cell across the way.

"That's me," said Jim.

"I'm Bert Lawson," said the drunk. "What you in for, Jim?"

"I'm in for robbing Bemis' bank," said Jim Fannin, wishing Bert Lawson would keep quiet. Jim Fannin didn't want to talk. He wanted to think of a way to escape.

"Well, if they send you up, they oughta send Mel Parker up, too," said Bert Lawson in a maudlin voice. "I saw you both at the back door of the bank. I saw your horseshoe pin and knew it was you, while you was talkin' to Parker. What the hell ever made you rob a bank, Jim?"

Jim Fannin didn't say a word. Bert Lawson had seen Mel Parker talking to him at the back door of the bank; had seen the horseshoe pin! Then Mel Parker had been talking to the real robber!

Now he *had* to escape!

The jail grew silent again. The footsteps of the jailer came down the corridor. He brought a tray of food, slipped it in the cell for Jim Fannin. Jim came close to the bars, gauged the distance to the jailer's throat, so that he might reach through the bars and clutch him, to make him produce the keys to the cell. But the jailer was too far away.

Fannin sank back again. The jailer left. The jail grew silent. A faint click sounded behind Jim. He turned, looked at a faint blotch of white that seemed to hang from the window against the wall of his cell.

Jim moved across the floor, reached out and found a piece of paper wrapped about a tiny stone in his hand. There was a cord about the paper. Jim pulled at it and when he pulled the weighted cord a faint scratchy sound came to him. Then the string appeared to reach its end. Jim reached up and found a gun attached to it.

He brought it in through the bars, opened the loading gate and looked at the loaded cylinders, then read the writing on the paper by the faint light that filtered in the window.

Jim:

There's something funny going on. Bemis looked afraid when I told him about the money. I don't think you should stay there to be killed. Your horse is saddled at the back of the jail. Let me know where you are and I'll come to you.

Love

There was no name, but Jim Fannin knew who had written that note. "Love". . . . Just as though Della had signed her name to it.

From down the corridor came the shuffling walk of the jailer, returning after the supper pan.

Jim Fannin smiled grimly as he tore the note to bits, then as he stepped over toward the cell door. He held the gun behind him. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

A Fighting Man Can't Quit

THE jailer stopped at the door, looked down and saw the untouched food on the floor. When he looked up, he was staring into the muzzle of the gun.

"Open the door!" said Jim Fannin softly.

The jailer's face whitened. He hesitated, then looked again at the grim smile about Jim Fannin's lips. Then he reached for the keys at his belt, inserted one in the lock and swung the door open.

Jim Fannin motioned with the gun and the jailer entered the cell, Fannin following him inside.

"I'll have to gag you," he told the jailer, taking the man's gun and tying his hands behind him.

"Sure," said the jailer sarcastically. "You have to gag me. You *had* to rob the bank, too, I suppose. You *had* to kill that fellow on the trail. That's the hell of it. A damn crook just *has* to do all the dirty things he does. If he doesn't do 'em he goes to jail or gets a rope around his neck. Don't apologize, Fannin. I know your breed!"

Jim Fannin felt the hot blood rush to his face. It was hell to have folks think that of him, when he didn't deserve any of it. He stuffed a gag in the jailer's mouth, went out and locked the door.

"You won't believe it, I suppose," he said bitterly. "But I'm sorry I had to do that."

He found his own guns in a drawer in the outer office and strapped them about his waist. He thrust the extra gun in his belt and went to the door. The street was empty and he stepped slowly out into the darkness.

He made his way to the back of the jail and saw the shadowy bulk of a saddled horse before him. He climbed in the saddle and started away in the darkness. He heard a sound inside the jail, the clang of a cell door, then a yell, and knew that somebody had discovered the jailer.

Jim Fannin put spurs to his bronc as another yell sounded behind him. A bullet whipped past his ear as he sped away. The clang of a shot came to him again and he felt the sharp sting of a wound in his side. He leaned over his bronc's neck and raked its sides.

Another shot racketed out in the night and a smash of numbing pain came to his left arm. Suddenly it swung loosely, dangling like a useless, senseless thing at his side as he plunged on through the dark-

ness, and Jim Fannin knew that his arm was broken.

All of Piute City seemed to have awakened behind him as Jim Fannin raced along. Shots laced at him with an increased clanging rattle. Bullets whined ominously in his ears. Shrill yells, loud curses, and the clatter of horses' hoofs swept up like a rushing tide behind him.

He reached the edge of town and roared out onto the flat and swept across it like a winged shadow. He turned his head and glanced behind him to see the ten, maybe fifteen shadowed riders who sped on his trail.

Jim Fannin felt that old hopeless bitterness envelope him again. What use to run, unless he ran to the border and escaped into Mexico? What use to try to establish his innocence when the proof of his guilt was so conclusive? Why try to buck so hopeless a game as this?

Then a vision of Della came up before his eyes, and there echoed in his brain the things she had said in the jail: "I love you because you are you. I love you whether you are right or wrong. . . . I would have married you a year ago. I'll marry you now. . . .

Jim Fannin gritted his teeth to put from his mind the sharp and maddening pain that stabbed through him. Wounded and hunted, why should he fight when a game was this hopeless? Sick with pain, already weak, why should he try to go on when he knew he was licked? Then he had his answer when he thought of Della. . . .

Each great leap of the plunging horse beneath him brought fresh agony to his broken arm. Each jar of the saddle under him brought fresh blood from the wound in his side. The mutter of his horse's hoofs was like thunder in his ears. The sweep of the wind was a rushing roar of sound. The shadows of the peaks made the night darker, stygian, as Jim climbed the hills. He stopped for a moment and looked back again. The rumble of hoofs came to him, but no sight of the posse greeted his eyes.

He turned off the trail and made his way slowly through the brush and rocks. He heard the posse pound past where he had turned off, and he smiled bitterly. The posse would go on toward the south, toward Mexico, where they naturally thought Jim Fannin had headed. No sane man, with sure-fire evidence stacked against him, would head anywhere else than to Mexico.

Jim Fannin smiled anew as he thought of that, for no sane man would dream of doing what he was going to do. It was a madman's plan—to clear his own name, and that of old Bill Fannin.

There was no coldly logical reason in the world for Jim to dream that Bill Fannin had not been shot while attempting a hold-up. That was positive, conclusive—but the evidence against Jim Fannin was like that. If the thin thread of hope Jim Fannin saw in Bemis' fear-stricken eyes meant anything, maybe that crumpled bill hey'd found in old Bill Fannin's gun-hand meant something, too!

The night waned and Jim Fannin rode slowly along, up high into the hills. He swayed in the saddle as he stopped in the early gray of dawn. He was far from Piute City, far safer, for the time being, from the posse. But he was near to death.

Here, starvation stared him in the face. His life, in a steady, pulsing stream, ran from the ragged bullet tear in his side, and his broken arm was throbbing, swelling, darkening with inflammation.

Weakly Jim Fannin dismounted. He sank down on the ground and worked with his one good hand to stop with a crude bandage the flow of blood from his wound. He finished and lay back against a rock to rest. . . .

WITH daylight, the sun rose and its burning heat beat down on Jim Fannin. He crawled to the water hole in the

basin where he stopped and bathed the broken arm. But still the fever of it mounted. The heat of it came up into his brain and burned at his mind. Then he shivered. He knew he should go back and let that posse take him. He was crazy to think he could do anything—whipped before he started. Then the picture of Della came to him. She'd marry him; she believed in him. He had to keep on fighting to prove she was right. . . .

As dusk settled down over the hills, Jim Fannin mounted again, headed back toward Piute City. He rode slowly so his arm would not jar. He kept thinking of Della so he could forget the fever and his weakness.

There were no lights in Piute City when Jim rode in, a gaunt, hollow-eyed ghost that moved soundlessly up the street. He stopped for a moment and pushed a note under the door of the little white house where Della lived. And he smiled with a tinge of bitterness. Della had said to tell her where he was, and she'd come to him. Maybe she wouldn't have to come so far now. . . .

Then Jim Fannin went on up the street again. He turned down an alley and stopped at the back door to Mel Parker's Concho Bar. He knocked and waited. Finally the door opened. A pistol muzzle poked out at Jim Fannin.

"It's Jim Fannin," he said. "I want to come in. I want to talk to you, Parker."

The door opened farther and Jim Fannin went inside. Mel Parker, holding his gun on Fannin, reached out and took Jim's gun. He stepped back and pulled down the blinds, lit a lamp and looked at Fannin keenly. He smiled as he noticed the sunken eyes, the broken arm, the blood-soaked shirt.

"Why did you come here?" he asked.

Jim Fannin sank down on a stool. "To proposition you," he said. "I'm in a hole, but I can put you in a hell of a hole, too, Parker."

"Put me in a hole?" His eyes slitted.

Jim Fannin nodded. "I've got you where the hair is short, Parker," he said. "Somebody saw you talking to that fellow that dressed like me back of the bank that night it was robbed. He thought it was me because he saw the horseshoe pin. He recognized you. I can put you in a hole by swearing you were in on that bank job with me. I can bring on a witness to swear he saw you there with me."

"What good would that do you?" asked Mel Parker. "And why shouldn't I kill you now, just to keep you from doing that?"

"It wouldn't do me any good," admitted Jim Fannin. "I'm just telling you what I *could* do to make you listen to reason. And you won't shoot me, because you were in on that bank job, and because you want the money. I'm the only one who knows where it is. Now do you see what I'm driving at, Parker?"

Mel Parker shook his head. "No," he said.

"I'm driving at a chance to live," said Jim Fannin. "I'm all shot to hell. I'm just about done, and I can't get out of the country because all the trails are blocked. I'm sick and I'm desperate and I'm tired of the game the way it's been played. I'm ready to play it a different way. I'm ready to make a deal with you. I'll split the money with you if you get me out of the country. You can do that because Rawls don't suspect you. You can have your men say I was seen heading north. You can draw all the men off the south trails, and send somebody with me to see that I get into Mexico. You can send me where my arm can be fixed and my side can be bandaged like it should be. Do that and I'll tell you where the money is. I'll take you there and you take half and I'll take half. Is that a bargain?"

Mel Parker studied Jim Fannin for a long moment. "Mebby you're trying to trick me, Fannin," he said. "Mebby you

hate my guts for framing you, and this is a stunt to get even."

Jim Fannin shook his head wearily. "I do hate your guts, Parker," he admitted. "But you're my only bet. I know you framed the robbery, so I know you're the only one that would be interested in getting the money. I can send you to jail with me, but that won't help me any. I can prove you were in on that robbery, but I can't prove I wasn't in on it. I'm in a hole and you're the only one I can turn to. If I'd just wanted to kill you I'd have had a gun in my hand when I came here."

Mel Parker nodded. "I'll take a chance," he said. "Where is the money?"

"I'll tell you where to meet me and I'll take you to it from there," said Fannin. "We'll have to do it tomorrow night, because it's too late now to get it done before daylight. Meet me at the flat rocks in the basin just north of that old cottonwood tree that edges my ranch. I'll be there right after dark."

"I'll be there," said Mel Parker. "And I'll watch you as you leave town. I'll watch that you don't talk to anybody, and that you don't come back. If this is a trick, God help you, Fannin!"

Jim Fannin smiled a twisted smile. He extended his hand for his gun and Mel Parker hesitated before he gave it to him. Jim thrust the gun in his holster, went out and mounted again.

He knew that Mel Parker was watching him as he went down the alley. He knew Parker would keep on watching him to see that he talked to no one. But Jim Fannin didn't need to talk to anyone now.

He rode up into the hills and came to his hiding place at the break of day. He squatted in the brush and waited till a long eared jackrabbit hopped close to the tiny tank of water. Then Jim Fannin's gun roared and the jack lay twitching beside the pool. Slowly, working with his one hand, Jim cleaned the jack, and cooked it over a tiny fire. He devoured it without salt, and felt the new strength flow back into him again.

But he was still feverish. His arm throbbed, and a mad pound of fevered blood was loud in his ears as he tried to gain strength enough to keep going till tonight. Tonight—when Mel Parker would come to get his split of the stolen bank money!

Throughout that long day, Jim fought back the phantoms that kept crowding up to haunt him. Phantoms of Della, visions of her, visions of old Bill Fannin, with a twenty-dollar bill clutched tightly in his hand—the hand that was supposed to have held a gun on Bemis while Bill Fannin had tried to rob a bank. . . .

Dusk came down with a rush and Jim rose and mounted again, holding tightly to the horn of his saddle as he rode along. When he came to the basin above the cottonwood tree that edged his ranch he dismounted, lifted the canvas sack from under a rock and looked at the bills inside it. Stacks of bills—new twenties. . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

Back Pay—In Blood!

THE sharp click of steel-shod hoofs on rock came to Jim Fannin, and he put the sack back under the rock again. The sound came close and Fannin rose. Then he watched Mel Parker ride into the clearing, sitting there like a black shadow.

"From here where do we go?" asked Mel Parker.

"We don't go anywhere," said Jim Fannin. "This is where it is."

Mel Parker dismounted slowly, carefully it seemed to Jim Fannin. Fannin pointed to the flat rock at his feet.

"It's under there, Parker," he said. "You get it."

Parker stooped down and lifted the rock. He drew out the canvas sack and

looked inside. Then he straightened up, look at Jim Fannin, and smiled, but when he spoke it seemed as though he spoke to some one else.

"I've got it," he said quietly. "Come on out."

Two men came out of the brush, and still Jim Fannin didn't move. He knew them, even in the dim light. They were Ganns and Weller, gunmen who worked for Mel Parker in his Concho Bar. Jim Fannin didn't seem surprised to see them.

"And now you want your money, I suppose," said Mel Parker. "I suppose you think I'm fool enough to split with you."

Jim Fannin didn't say anything. He just stood there and waited. He was counting on Mel Parker talking.

"If you think so, you're crazy," Parker went on. "Because all you'll get is a bullet in the belly, Fannin. You're a bank robber and I could kill you and brag about it. But I don't need that to make me kill you. I'm going to kill you because I hate your insides. I've hated you ever since you killed that fellow they called Wilkes, two years ago. I hate you for that because Wilkes was my brother. When he ran out from the pen he came to me and changed his name and nobody was wise to him. But you killed him. Just when he was getting by to a new start under a new name you blotted him out!"

"He made me kill him," said Jim Fannin.

"And I hate you because you're in the way," Mel Parker went on as if he was talking about something entirely impersonal. "If it wasn't for you I think I could marry Della Hayden. You think that's funny, don't you? But I do, and I'm getting you out of the way for sure this time. I framed you with that horseshoe pin of yours. I found it and gave it to a fellow I used to know that came here and needed a lift. He was about your build. He dressed like you. He dropped your pin on the floor after he robbed Bemis. You know that, but I wanted you to know why."

Jim Fannin smiled. "That's just what I expected, Parker," he said. "In fact, it's all just like I expected. I expected that a man who did a clever stunt just couldn't keep from boasting about it. I expected to have you taunt me and tell me why you framed me, because I guess that's just human nature. A man don't just walk up to a man and kill him. A man like you takes a lot of pleasure in telling a fellow all about it before he does that. You've sure lived up to my expectations, Parker, and I'm glad you did. I'm glad because I've got a witness to hear you tell it. I've—"

Mel Parker gave a startled curse. His hand flew back to his holster. Ganns and Weller whipped up their guns and leaped back for the safety of the brush as a shot snarled out from atop a rock behind Jim Fannin.

Jim was so weak he could hardly stand, so he just dropped. He let all the starch go out of him at once and dropped flat on the ground while the bullets from the guns of Weller and Ganns sang over his head. He dropped behind a rock and poked his gun muzzle out from behind it.

The snarl of guns was loud as Jim's gun started crashing, and Ganns screamed as he fell. Mel Parker was running, the canvas sack in his hand, but a shot from up above the rocks clanged out and Parker fell. Weller was hunkered down, shooting, but not seeing what he was shooting at. A bullet knocked him back.

His guns stopped their clatter as Sheriff Rawls clambered down from the nest of rocks. He stopped and looked at Fannin. Then he picked up the sack and looked inside.

"Does that satisfy you?" asked Fannin.

Rawls nodded. "It satisfies me, and it shames me, Jim," he said. "Piute City will have a lot to make up to you because of this."

JIM FANNIN rose shakily to his feet. He went to his mount and climbed into the saddle. "And what would you say if I told you I had a hunch that Bill Fannin never tried to rob Bemis's bank?" he asked the sheriff.

Rawls looked queerly at Jim Fannin. He looked at the flushed and fevered face, at his sunken eyes, at the dangling arm and the blood-soaked shirt. He looked at the sack in his hand and smiled a little twisted smile.

"Ten minutes ago I'd have said you were crazy, Jim," he said. "Ten minutes ago I'd have said anybody was crazy that thought *you* wasn't a bank robber. When Della came to me and told me you left a note with her to have me hide out here to find out who robbed the bank, I thought she was crazy to believe in you then, and I thought I was crazy to believe in her. But now. . . . Well, I dunno."

Jim Fannin didn't know either. For he was playing another hunch, just on the chance that a man would talk, would rise to a bait that Jim planned to dangle in front of his eyes. And that bait was Fannin's own life. He was going to give a man a chance to shut Jim Fannin's mouth forever with a bullet. . . .

The world spun dizzily in Jim Fannin's eyes as they rode back and entered Piute City. But he gritted his teeth and forced himself on. It was his job. Nobody else in the world could do it. He had to last. . .

Dirty gray, the dawn of another day showed dimly in the east. Jim Fannin stopped at the big stone-fronted house where Bemis, the banker, lived. He dismounted while Rawls watched him.

"Keep out of sight, Rawls," said Jim Fannin. "But keep where you can hear."

Jim Fannin went forward and knocked.

Footsteps came toward the door, then it swung open and Bemis peered out at that gray-faced, bloody-stained ghost there in front of him, with the spark of life burning only in his eyes.

"I brought back your money, Bemis," Jim Fannin said. "I'm bringing it back like old Bill Fannin brought some to you. Like he brought back a twenty dollar bill and asked you what the hell? I found that twenty in his fist just before I buried him—in the hand you'd said had held a gun on you while my dad tried to rob the bank. That puzzled me, but now I have it worked out. You couldn't afford to have Bill Fannin tell he got a fake twenty at your bank. That would make folks suspicious, make 'em look at their twenties when they got them here. So you killed him. You shot him and stuffed some money in his pocket and put his gun on the floor and said he tried to rob you. You did that to shut his mouth. You—"

A gun swept up from Bemis' side, flaming almost in Jim's face. The fire of it scorched him as he moved his head to one side. His gun came out and it roared close to Bemis's body.

Then Bemis was wilting down on the doorstep, and Jim Fannin was staggering out to the walk again, reeling weakly down toward that little white cottage where Della lived. . . .

He felt Rawls' hand on his arm, trying to pull him back. He heard Rawls' voice telling him to get a doctor quick; but Rawls' words were dim, distant things that had no bearing on this at all. . . .

"You're in a hell of a shape, Jim. You'll die if you don't get fixed up."

Jim Fannin staggered on, thinking only of Della, of what she had said, and of what she had written in the note: "Let me know where you are and I'll come to you. . . ."

Jim Fannin smiled. He wouldn't die, because he couldn't. Della didn't need to come to him. He was going to her, bearing with him proudly a name as clean and bright as the rays of the new sun spearing up to gild the high peaks in the west. How could a man die with the miracle of that in his mind . . . ?

THE END

Hog-Tied for the Hangnoose

By Miles Overholt

(Author of "Counterfeit Badman," etc.)

—that was Johnny Gilmore, small-spread cattleman, after Two-fer-One Klafka had spun a web of evidence so cleverly that it could only end on a murderer's gallows and deliver, free of charge to Klafka, not only Johnny's ranch, but the girl he loved more than life!

JOHNNY GILMORE guessed that it was about time to conclude the confab. "So you haze them juvenile bovines acrost the Sinks next Tuesday," he summarized, "and I'll meet you halfway with the dinero."

Buff Harkins grunted. "An' drive 'em onto yore range yoreself?"

"Shore. You can go get back home in a hurry then, jinglin' yore filthy lucre," Johnny replied. "Have a drink."

They took two, and then Harkins shuffled out.

Two-Fer-One Klafka was peering deep into his glass of whiskey, seeing things. He was thinking what a fine place for a killing were the Sinks, those desolate flats, thirty miles across, where there could be no unseen witnesses. And he could picture in his whiskey glass just how it could be arranged so that Johnny Gilmore would be set down as the killer.

"Joe," Johnny said to the bartender, "you ought to teach that licker of yores to rattle before it strikes. It's poisoner'n a snattlerake."

He went out and over to the bank where he got the cash to pay for Buff Harkins' calves. Then he headed out across the upper end of the Sinks toward his prosperous little JG spread. But just before reaching the trail that would take him to his ranch, he turned his protesting horse toward the hills and cantered up a

slope. About three miles farther along he came in sight of a cabin from whose rock chimney a thin spiral of smoke was curling.

He dismounted, and a clear-eyed young man grinned up at him from the door.

"Howya, Pete," Johnny whispered.

The youth's grin widened.

Johnny dismounted, taking some wrapped articles from his saddlebags, passing them over to the young man.

"Slab of bacon and such," he said.

The youngster didn't answer. There was a reason. He was a deaf mute. He had no other friend than Johnny anywhere. He had wandered to Johnny's ranch a couple of months before on a decrepit old pony, which had immediately lain down and died.

Johnny gave the boy a little work to do, bought him some clothing to replace his rags, and, finally, located him in an old nester's cabin. The nester had abandoned his place and Johnny helped the young mute acquire it by paying the back taxes. The youngster did some trapping and fishing, and kept Johnny supplied with fresh venison and trout.

Pete could hardly wait to get Johnny into the cabin. His eyes were bright and there was a nervous quiver on his lips.

"Yo're all excited, Pete," Johnny said, watching him. "What's on yore mind?"

Pete snatched up his pad and wrote: "That letter you brought Saturday was from my sister—my only relative. She sold our home place for $8000 and is coming out to live with me."

"Why, that's fine, Pete," Johnny said heartily. "You'll be able to make a real spread out of this place with that much dinero."

Pete nodded, writing again: "I've got to fix up the cabin better. It's hardly fit for a woman."

"I'm goin' into town Monday," Johnny said. "I'll get some curtains and woman beddin' and stuff. Make out a list. I'll take a pack animal so I can bring a load."

Pete's eyes expressed his thanks. He nodded. While Johnny threw some supper together, Pete wrote out the list. He would be able to pay Johnny when his sister arrived. Johnny rode home at sundown.

Later that night a cowboy left a note with Buff Harkins. It read:

> Wish you'd drive them calves over Monday, instead of Tuesday. I got a trip to make Tuesday.
>
> Johnny Gilmore

Buff swore, but went about gathering the calves he had sold to Johnny.

Johnny's two riders were over in Cedar Brakes, chousing out strays, and would not return until the end of the week. The young cowman was, therefore, all alone in the house Sunday night. Shortly after midnight a figure stole through the darkness back of the stable and glided to the house, slipped noiselessly inside.

The marauder stole over to the bunk where Johnny lay sleeping. With a swift chopping motion he brought down his gun, and Johnny's head sank deeper into the pillow. The night prowler grinned crookedly. One blow was enough. Turning quickly out to the corral, he caught up Johnny's pinto gelding which, he knew, was wearing a broken shoe. He saddled the horse, mounted and rode out.

BUFF HARKINS, pushing the bawling calves ahead of him, appeared in the Sinks about noon. His customary grouch left for a moment when he saw the rider approaching on Johnny Gilmore's calico pony. But his eyes widened when he observed Two-Fer-One Klafka was riding the horse. Klafka rode up to him.

"What the hell you doin' on Johnny's hoss?" Buff wanted to know.

" 'Tendin' to business—as per usual," Two-Fer-One grinned, flipping out Johnny's sixgun from Johnny's holster. "An'

now, if yuh don't mind, gimme that bill-of-sale you got in yore pocket!"

"Oh, like that, huh?"

"Naw, quite some different," Klafka growled. "Hand it over damn sudden."

Harkins grew pale about the mouth. His jaw drooped open a little. He passed over the filled-out bill of sale. "What's it all about?" he demanded, his voice shrill. "Hell, you can't get away with no such doin's!"

"I guess yo're right," Klafka leered. Calmly, he squeezed the trigger.

Harkins groped for the saddle horn, missed it and pitched to the ground. Klafka grinned as he watched. Riding in then, he scattered the calves, turned and rode back to the JG.

All was quiet about the ranch yard. Quickly, he unsaddled Johnny's horse and drove it into the corral. Making his cautious way to the house, he went inside. Johnny was still unconscious, just as he had anticipated he would be.

Klafka replaced Johnny's gun-belt on its customary nail, slipped Biff Harkins' bill of sale into the cowboy's pocket, then went out and down to a patch of shrubbery where his own horse had been tethered. Mounting, he rode in a roundabout way up the valley, crossed over and headed for his own ranch, which adjoined that of Buff Harkins' little spread on Coyote Creek.

"Which shore as hell fixes things purty," he thought to himself, beaming as he rode in at his own place. "I kin now buy Harkins' layout for a song, and what a sweet spread that'll make of the Lazy K."

He turned his horse into the corral and went into his shack, still exulting. "Slickest piece of work I ever done," he chortled. "Sheriff'll find the bill-o'-sale and dough in Gilmore's pocket—when I hint it—and that'll give him the motive—gettin' them calves for nothin'."

It was not until Monday night that Johnny Gilmore returned to consciousness. With a groan, he stirred erect in his bunk. His head felt as if he had left it out all winter. His hand groped to the bump. Amazedly, he pondered.

"Now whatever in hell happened to me?" he groaned. But thinking back did little good. All he could remember was going to sleep.

He got up, legs shaking, made a light and took a look around the house. Nothing was amiss. He made some coffee-royal with the pint of whiskey he had brought home from town, and felt better after awhile. He looked at his watch. It was only eight o'clock. Something was wrong. He had gone to bed at nine o'clock. His watch was still running; so was the tin clock in the kitchen. He couldn't believe he had been knocked out for nearly 24 hours, but his time-piece told that kind of a story.

"In that case, it must be Monday night," he said to himself. "Buff Harkins is headin' this way in the mornin' and I got to meet him."

He went back to bed after awhile and slept fitfully until daybreak. Later, when he went out to the corral, the pinto neighed at him critically.

"Huh? What've I done, feller?" inquired Johnny. "Sort of neglected you, huh?"

He watered and fed him, then cooked himself some breakfast. The bump had gone down and his head felt better. Feeling stronger, he saddled the pony and headed out toward the Sinks.

MEANWHILE, Two-Fer-One Klafka had saddled a fresh mount and ridden across the Sinks. Buff Harkins' body was still lying where he had watched it fall the day before. Ascertaining that, he rode swiftly to town and to Sheriff Fred Bell's office.

"Somebody salivated Buff Harkins," he told the lawman, simulating excitement.

"I was ridin' acrost the Sinks, headin' for Joe Bogue's place to look at some steers, when I found him. Been dead mebbe three-four hours. I didn't look clost."

When, with the sheriff, he raced across the flats to the murder scene, Johnny Gilmore was examining the body. Johnny looked up when he saw the lawman.

"It's Buff Harkins," he said, grimly. He paused, his eyes widening as a thought occurred to him. "How come you found out about it?"

"Klafka found him," Bell said. Then, after a few minutes' examination, "You was to meet him here today, wasn't you? Le's see yore gun."

Johnny nodded as he passed it over.

"Hm! One exploded shell," commented the sheriff. Johnny looked surprised. The lawman got to his feet.

"Better ride into town with us, Johnny," he said. "Where's Buff's hoss?"

"Search me," Johnny said.

Bell packed the body across his saddle.

In about an hour after they got back the coroner had extracted the bullet which had gone through Harkins' heart and lodged in the back. It was a .45. It fitted Johnny's gun. Johnny Gilmore went to jail.

"Did yuh search him?" Klafka probed the sheriff. "Might find some other evidence."

Bell did then, and found the bill-of-sale.

"Kinda cinches it," Klafka leered.

Kay DeBye, Pete's sister, arrived at Cold Springs on Wednesday. Pete, after waiting two days for Johnny Gilmore to show up at his cabin, had walked into town, a long, hot trek. Pete told Kay all about Johnny Gilmore. He'd learned, through devious ways, about the arrest, as well as other details.

"Can't we do something for him?" Kay, who was neither deaf nor mute, asked.

"I've got that eight thousand dollars with me," Kay said. "Take it, Pete, and bail him out. Use whatever you need."

So while Kay went to the Palace hotel, Pete found his way to the jail. He scribbled his desires on his little tablet, only to learn that murder was not a bailable crime. That the trial was to come up within a week. When Kay learned of it, she obtained permission to see Johnny.

"I'm Kay DeBye, Peter's sister," she told Johnny at the bars of his cell. "I want to help you. You've been so very kind to Peter. He told me all about you. He thinks an awful lot of you."

Johnny grinned, but shook his head. "I don't see what you can do," he told her, his eyes glowing at the sight of her finely-carved face and her lithe, rounded, youthful figure. "All I know is—I didn't do it. I been tryin' to figger it out. I was framed, but damned if I know why—or who's behind it."

"Well, we'll do something—Peter and I," Kay said. "We need you—for a neighbor."

Johnny looked at her hungrily. He said nothing, but a strange longing such as he'd never before felt, filled him.

HERB HANNA was young, but smart. He was no match for District Attorney E. Harris Swerington, but he was a good lawyer.

"Come clean, Johnny," he told his client. "I've got to know everything—every last detail, no matter how unimportant it seems."

"You already know everything," Johnny said. "I got a bump on the cabeza which put me out for a whole damn day. We got to start from there."

"Which is no place at all to start from," Hanna said. "Who's that girl who's been hanging around here every day?"

"Pete DeBye's sister," Johnny told him. "She just got in town from back East somewheres. She couldn't be of any help. She's a plumb stranger."

But Hanna went to see her, anyway.

He couldn't afford to overlook any bets. Things looked too bad for Johnny Gilmore. . . .

THE district attorney made a good showing when the trial opened. It was obviously a dead open-and-shut case.

All the cowmen in the country were in the courtroom, it seemed, including Two-Fer-One Klafka, who, of course was the principal witness.

The prosecution exhibited the bill-of-sale which had been found duly signed, in Johnny Gilmore's pocket.

"The motive," the District Attorney said, "is plain. Gilmore saw a splendid chance to commit murder there on the flats, too far from any possible detection. You know, gentlemen of the jury, that no one could, by any far stretch of the imagination, hide within five miles of the scene of the murder. A witness would be impossible."

He went on then to prove that Johnny Gilmore had made an appointment with Harkins to meet him in the middle of the Sinks—a strange appointment indeed. Four witnesses testified to the fact. But the motive was clear—Gilmore wanted Harkins out there where he could kill him without suspicion. It was a simple method of acquiring a herd of young stock.

But Gilmore had made several slips, the prosecutor went on to point out. Jason Klafka had accidentally found the body; he had trailed Johnny Gilmore's horse to the JG ranch. The tracks were easily read because the pinto pony was wearing a broken shoe. There was an exploded shell in Gilmore's gun, and the bullet which had killed Harkins had come from it. So—there was the murderer, Johnny Gilmore!

The jury and the spectators were convinced. Johnny Gilmore was obviously guilty. Why, he didn't even have an alibi to prove his innocence.

Two-Fer-One Klafka was placed on the stand by the district attorney. Yes, he had found the body as he was riding across the Sinks; he had trailed the slayer's horse tracks. He hated to testify against Johnny Gilmore who was his friend, but those were the facts. He was only doing his duty as a citizen—for Buff Harkins had also been his friend.

The prosecutor finished with Klafka, and Herb Hanna took him in hand.

"Mr. Klafka," he said, "with the court's permission, I would like to read a report of a verbatim conversation which was held out there in the upper end of the Sinks last Monday, so that you may verify it."

The judge frowned, and waited.

"Mr. Klafka," Hanna went on, smilingly, "listen close to this and see if you remember any of it." Then he read:

"Howya Buff."

"What the hell you doin' on Johnny's hoss?"

"'Tendin' to business—as per usual. An' now, if yuh don't mind, gimme that bill-o'-sale you got in yore pocket!"

"Oh, like that, huh?"

"Naw, quite some different. Hand it over damn sudden."

"What's it all about? Hell, you can't get away with no such doin's."

"I guess yo're right."

Hanna turned to the jury. "Then, gentlemen," he concluded, "came the report of a six-shooter, and Buff Harkins died."

The district attorney, who had been trying to object all along, now jumped up. Vehemently, he insisted that no such evidence could be admissable—whatever the defense attorney was trying to get at.

The judge rapped for order. He turned on Hanna with a frown. "Just what is all this you've been reading?"

Herbert Hanna said: "Your honor, it is, as I said in the beginning, a verbatim conversation between Buff Harkins and his murderer."

The prosecuting attorney wagged his head in defiance. "Your honor, all this mysterious business comes under the head of irrevelancy. It has been deliberately instigated for the purpose of distracting the jury. I object to such tactics and ask that the attorney for the defense stick to facts, not fairy stories."

Herb Hanna grinned. "I'm sticking to facts—things that I can prove," he said.

Meanwhile, no one was paying any attention to Two-Fer-One Klafka whose face had gone pasty white under his tan. He had wilted in his seat on the witness stand. Hanna addressed him sharply.

"Is that the actual conversation, Klafka?"

"I dunno nothin' about what happened out there," Klafka snarled. "How could I?"

Hanna smiled enigmatically. Klafka's eyes were distorted and his lips twitched nervously. He was greatly relieved when he was dismissed. The district attorney had no more witnesses. Herb Hanna motioned to Pete DeBye, who nodded, instead of speaking, when he was sworn in. . . .

HANNA quickly explained that his witness was a deaf mute and asked that a clerk be appointed to read the testimony. This was granted and the clerk of the court acted as the reader. Herb Hanna wrote his first question, and the clerk read it aloud before passing it to Pete. It asked:

"Do you swear that the conversation just read passed between Buff Harkins and his murderer last Monday at about 11:30 o'clock?"

Pete vigorously nodded his head.

The district attorney again objected violently. How could a deaf and dumb man "hear" a conversation anywhere? Particularly one in the middle of a desert where no one could possibly hide.

So Herbert Hanna wrote and the clerk read: "How do you know this conversation took place out there in the middle of the Sinks, as you state?"

Pete wrote rapidly on his pad for a moment, then the clerk read: "Johnny Gilmore was to bring me some merchandise from town on Monday. I expected him about noon. So at about 11:30 I turned my powerful field glasses in the direction of town and saw two men meet. One was riding Johnny Gilmore's horse. I saw what they said. I saw the shooting. It was so vivid a scene that I remembered the conversation."

The prosecutor shouted in uncontrollable irritation. "How in all creation could you 'remember' a conversation no one could possibly hear?"

Herb Hanna grinned. "He can't hear you," he said, "but I'll ask him."

The reply came back: "I am a lip reader. The field glasses brought them plenty close enough for me to read their words clearly."

Things weren't going so good for the district attorney now, and he was well aware of it, although he still didn't know what Hanna was trying to get at. He was soon to learn. For Johnny's attorney wrote:

"If the man who shot and killed Buff Harkins is in the courtroom, can you point him out?"

The jury and spectators watched in awed silence. Pete arose slowly—and levelled a finger at Two-Fer-One Klafka.

Two-Fer-One bellowed wildly. "It's a damn lie!" he cried out. "I—"

Then he went for his gun, fumbled, and Pete DeBye, leaping from his chair, grasped Johnny Gilmore's six-shooter which had been lying on a table as one of the exhibits. He thrust it into the hand of the prisoner.

When Klafka's first shot missed Pete, Johnny swung into action. His first bullet caught Klafka in the gun arm. The weapon clattered to the floor. But Klafka jerked up a second gun from the waistband of his overalls with his left hand and

fired again. The bullet piled into the wall between the judge and the witness chair.

Then Johnny got his bearings, and a well placed shot broke Klafka's left arm. But by that time Sheriff Bell had reached the killer and had subdued him.

The judge ordered Johnny freed. "By his actions, Klafka admitted his guilt," the court held. And while undergoing an operation at the little hospital conducted by Doc White, the coroner, Klafka confessed.

When Johnny Gilmore walked out of the court room with his name cleared, Pete DeBye and his sister, Kay, met him at the doorway.

"Thanks, Pete, old feller," Johnny grinned.

And Pete, reading Johnny's lips, understood him.

Kay DeBye came forward. "It was so little to do, but I'm glad—for the first time in my life—that Peter can't talk."

"He talked plenty this time," Johnny Gilmore said.

"Now what?" smiled Kay DeBye, her eyes telling more than her lips.

"Why, I done figgered, practically on the spur of the moment, as you might say, that you and Pete can't live in that dang cabin while I got so much room that ought to be taken up at the ranch," Johnny said. "So I thought mebbe we—us three—could kinda—you know—move into my ranch—like—like—well, like one family."

"Pete would like that," Kay smiled demurely.

"And you?"

"It runs in the family," Kay said. "I'm just about as silly as Pete—about falling for people."

Johnny swallowed hard, and blinked his eyes—but he kissed her before they started up the street together. Kay Gilmore was a mighty pretty name. . . .

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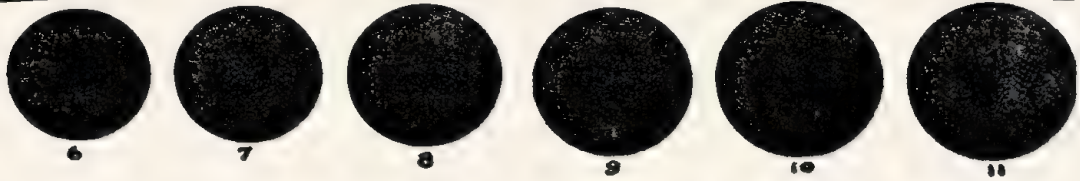

KILLER, PACK YOUR

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Brett rode into Crazy Water from the north. Not that he had any business there; he came to Crazy Water only because it lay across his trail. For trails were Brett's life now; empty trails to be ridden blindly, with the prayer that he would find the end, and with the growing bitter knowledge that the end of the trail would be his end as well.

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and that even prison cannot take from him. His jaw was lean and square, and his wide shoulders unbowed. But the canker showed in his eyes—fireless pools of hopelessness. It was a brand for all men to see . . . . and despise.

Brett crossed the wooden bridge over Crazy Water Creek and rode hesitantly into the A-1 Stables. Quitting his junk saddle, he stood in obvious humility before the barn man.

The hostler, a cat-like gent, quick to take advantage of men and things, snarled: "Well, what you gawkin' fer? What yuh want?"

"How's chances," asked Brett, patiently, "to work out grain for my pony?"

"Not any," was the tart rejoinder. "This is a pay barn, run by an' for cash-money. It'll be a dollar and a half."

Fire touched Brett's eyes, as when a breeze fans dying coals to brief life. And, then, as with the coal, life ebbed. From his jeans Brett drew a few silver coins, counted them, and shook his head. "Thanks," he murmured sullenly. "I'll graze him down at the crick."

He led his pony away, hobbling on run-over boots. The rebuff was forgotten, just as he'd had to forget so many this last year. At the creek margin, he staked the animal and went back uptown.

Crazy Water was like all the rest of the cow-towns he'd struck——a wide spot in the road, lined with drab, unimposing false fronts. Brett chose a smelly restaurant, wolfed down a meal and came again to the street. Now his silver was all gone and he was still hungry. Seemed as if he was always hungry; hungry of belly and perhaps hungrier of soul.

Dusk settled swiftly, the chill upland wind striking through his thin clothes.

"Gotta line up a coat," he told himself. "An' get grub for tomorrow. Gotta land a job or steal a gun—one!" The last was plainly an afterthought, spoken in rebellion, without meaning it. He was actually through with guns, forever.

At the corner of the barn he paused. In the corral beyond there sounded the rush of ponies and the low tones of men, all hidden in the blanketing darkness. Boot-steps slogged across the walk and a voice said: "No sleep tonight, boys! A hundred head to be hand-nursed out of the Hangin' Hills. An' it's blacker'n the inside of a boot!"

"To hell with it!" someone snapped. "I was set to meet a purty little filly tonight an' . . . ."

"Tell it to Milt Standage," broke in the first, "or jerk yore latigo an' get goin' from here."

There was no more talk, only the slither and creak of gear being screwed in place. And something oppressive seemed to settle over the spot, like a sinister shade intent upon evil. Brett felt it keenly, and held to his place. Soon a gate squealed open and hoofbeats lifted. Five horsemen slid past him, loping along the street and across the bridge with an echoing tattoo of hoofs. And Brett walked aimlessly up the walk. The lights of the Bullhide Bar drew him, and he entered with the uneasiness of one who hasn't the price of a single drink.

An alert bartender accosted him. "What's yores, friend?"

Brett said: "I'm lookin' for an honest job."

"That so?" smirked the man. "Found one?"

Brett flushed, shook his head.

"Lots of men being used," grinned the barkeep, jerking his thumb. "Try them four playin' cards. They're lookin' for men." And he chuckled as at some rare joke as Brett moved reluctantly toward the four who owlishly studied their cards.

ONE, a smallish man with snapping eyes, shoved in his stack. "Bet 'em high, gents, an' sleep in the corral!" Three hands came sailing into the dis-

card. The little man chuckled, raked in the pot then taunted them by spreading out a busted flush.

A big, grizzled cowdog snorted. "Call that gamblin', yuh little wart?"

"I win the money," grinned the little man. "If yuh wanta cross the crick you gotta wet yore hoofs. No wonder you gents don't prosper."

"Yeah," sneered one. "I reckon you need gamblin' money, Jake, way yore cow business is paying. You're a fine one to talk about prosperin'."

Jake's grin faded and silence grew, as if the speaker had touched an unmentionable topic. Brett cleared his throat, bringing four heads sharply up.

"Well!" snapped one. "What you want?"

Said Brett, "I'm looking for work. Name uh Brett Killeen."

One of that quartet turned his chair to stare. He was dark, heavy-bodied and thick-necked. The mark of arrogant authority gave his great shoulders a restless, twisting swagger. His insolent eyes ran up and down Brett's lean height and his heavy lips were sneering.

"Job, eh? So a jailbird wants work! What pen, feller?"

Brett struggled with resentment, but there had been too many such humiliations for him to take exception now. "Deerlodge," he confessed wearily.

"Well I'm damned!" swore the man called Jake. The rest said nothing at all, plainly registering distrust. The truth, brutally spoken, silenced them. The bartender's chuckle broke the spell. And then the dark, thick-shouldered man turned the flash of his temper on Brett.

"You got nerve, feller, tryin' to horn in here," he snarled. "This range is overrun with your kind, mostly uncaught. We'll tolerate no more, except from a cottonwood limb. Git out!"

Brett held a tight rein on his temper, his face reddening in the succeeding silence. Every eye was on him. Two of the card players were stonily indifferent and Jake seemed mildly disgusted. Again the big man said. "Get out!"

Brett flared angrily: "Bridle yore tongue, Hog-face! If you want me out, mebby you'd like to try bouncin' me out."

And even as he spoke he wondered at the strange stirrings inside him; something that eased the sodden ache in his heart. Behind him a chair scraped. The big man came up. "Why you damn—"

Jake's voice broke in: "Cash me out, Standage. I'm fed with penny ante bets. I'm gonna gamble."

The heavy-jowled man subsided, glaring. Brett grinned coldly, waited a reasonable moment, then pushed outside.

Brett moved aimlessly, his long arms limp at his side. Behind him the saloon door batted open and shut and a hard grip was on his arm. Brett whirled to find Jake of the poker table regarding him.

The cowman said: "Come on," and led the way across the street. Brett, for no reason at all, followed along.

His short legs pumping, Jake buzzed along the walk. Once he stopped, banged open a door and bawled: "Wong! Two steaks an' trimmin's to room twelve!" Then he was off again, wheeling into the Cattleman's House, past the desk and up the stairs. In room twelve he lit up a cigar, and passed Brett a bottle.

"I'm Jake Godfrey—Lazy G! Have a drink."

Brett grinned and took a long swallow. "What you want of me?"

"Answer me this," retorted the rancher. "What do you really want here?"

"A job—with no trouble connected."

"Trouble-shy, eh? Don't even pack a gun. Why?"

"A man needed killing," murmured Brett. "An'—I killed him!"

"Simple," nodded Jake Godfrey. "His friends turned wolf an' yores turned coyote. I know, son. Broken faith is

a heap worse than a ball an' chain."

"You shore said it," mused Brett, bitterly. "A hell of a lot worse."

Jake Godfrey grunted, took another tack. "I got a nice outfit back in the hills. Five cow-hands an' a thousand head of beef—or was a thousand. How'd you like to go up there?"

Brett tried to stifle his eagerness. "I'll do anything. Ridin', buildin' fence—"

"None of them things," barked the cowman. "You'll be the new foreman."

"What . . . .?" Brett stared.

"The ramrod, succeedin' one Boone Dawson. You'll stop the leaks an' make the outfit pay. I've too many irons in the fire down here. If you fail, you'll do no worse than me. If you make good, I'll talk to you about somethin' more important for the both of us. Any questions?"

Emotion burned like fire through Brett. He trembled, wondering if Godfrey noticed. As if from afar, he heard himself saying: "Yes—two questions. First, why choose me for this?"

"My business. Half my fun is buckin' a pat hand with a busted flush."

"Not always winning poker," reflected Brett, and he was thinking of that sullen man at the card table, and the name he had heard spoken in the gloom. "One more question. Just who and what have I got to look out for on your Lazy G?"

Jake Godfrey's eyes twinkled as he stroked his jaw thoughtfully. "That," he said, with a wary look toward the saloon door, "is what I'm sending you to find out. Satisfactory?"

"Satisfactory," grunted Brett, without enthusiasm. And then the two of them gave themselves to the business of finishing the supper fetched by the bowing Chinaman.

For hours after he stretched out in the hotel bed—his first in long months—Brett alternately thrilled to his new chance and speculated fearfully on the possibility of trouble. And the more he thought about it, the less he liked it.

"It never changes," he reflected, bitterly. "Trouble's ridin' the breeze on a range run by that ugly Standage. I've met his kind before, and suffered for it. It's no job for me. In the morning I'll tell Godfrey I've changed my mind."

CHAPTER TWO

Gunsmoke Spread

WHEN dawn broke and Brett arose, he found no reason to change his mind. "Maybe I'm too suspicious," he argued with himself. "Godfrey wouldn't send a plumb stranger to run his place if there was trouble."

He was *whooshing* over the wash basin when Jake Godfrey came stomping in. "Sleep well?" inquired the rancher.

"Yeah," lied Brett.

"Fine!" Golden coins clinked on the bed. Godfrey said casually: "There's a hundred and fifty advance expense money. Buy what you need—a gun an' ca'tridges. An' meet me at the Chink restaurant."

Brett straightened, reaching for the towel. "Listen—" he began, then stopped, for Godfrey's boots were churning swiftly down the hall. Brett picked up the coins.

A hundred and fifty dollars is a lot of money to one who has forgotten hope. For a long minute he handled it unbelievingly. Once Brett went so far as to throw the coins back onto the bed, thinking of Jake's injunction to buy a gun. But in the end they went into his pocket and he walked down to breakfast.

Jake hadn't waited, according to the Chink. So Brett ordered, finding joy in calling for whatever he wanted. The coffee warmed him. Side meat and eggs found the hollows of him and filled him out. The roar of Crazy Water had a new significance this morning. Hard, bright sunlight was on the street and Brett felt a renewed eagerness to live.

Outside he encountered Milt Standage. The hill rancher halted, hot blood darkening his face. Then, as something beyond Brett took his interest, he swerved past, grinning broadly. Brett heard him call: "Sheriff! Come over here."

Brett enjoyed buying a good outfit in the big General Store where he laid in levis, jumper, fleece-lined coat and slicker. But he found no pleasure in selecting a pistol. He didn't want one. All his misfortunes could be charged to his use of a six-shooter. Yet somehow that cruel, taunting grin he remembered on Milt Standage's face helped him in his choice. When he left the store, a heavy .45 slapped his thigh. The feel of it renewed the old courage he had believed dead.

Moving along the walk in search of Jake Godfrey, Brett saw a tall, cadaverous man emerge from between two buildings. The fellow called imperiously: "Wait a minute, you!" And Brett saw the glitter of a star.

The lawman shambled up scowling, devoid of warmth or kindliness. He said: 'You've got an hour to pack your plunder an' quit Crazy Water! We don't want your kind around."

"We?" asked Brett. "Who's we?"

"The decent citizens of Crazy Water! No jobless jailbird can. . . ."

Brett gave voice to a new pride. "It won't wash, Sheriff. Tell yore friend Standage I've landed a job—roddin' the Lazy G for Jake Godfrey."

The sheriff bridled. *"You!"* he sputtered. "Jake Godfrey?" He glanced across at the Bullhide Saloon like a man who has played out his instructions only to find them inadequate.

"Sure!" grinned Brett. "Go talk it over with Standage. An' let me know what he says."

From down at the stable came Jake Godfrey's voice: "Git a move on, Killeen! We ain't got all day!"

Cursing under his breath, the sheriff hurried across the street. Brett moved to the stable.

The little cowman looked him up and down, grinning. "Cripes, spread yoreself, eh? Good! Now you all set?"

"An' ready for whatever!"

The bustling little rancher squeezed his arm. "Which mostly you'll have no trouble findin', son," he said. "Le's ride."

TWO hours later they were high in the hills, with wooden heights rolling up ahead. Godfrey rode silent and moody. But to Brett this was freedom and opportunity. He gulped in the crisp air, feasting his eyes on the scenic ruggedness.

Coming abruptly to a rim, the ground dropped sheer to a broad, oval meadow.

"Purty," murmured Brett.

"The Lazy G. My white elephant."

Brett gazed long and steadily. Horses grazed in the meadow. In yonder cottonwoods were the log house and familiar outbuildings. Back of the house water foamed over the rim to feed the creek.

Godfrey led the way, sliding his pony. Loose rock clattered downward, the echoes fetching a man from the house. Brett saw that he was lean and saturnine with restless snapping eyes, and his grin was cat-like and mechanical.

Brett acknowledged his "Howdy" with a curt nod and swung down.

"York," said Godfrey, "this is Brett Killeen, your new top-hand. Take his orders or roll your plunder and quit."

York seemed startled. "Why—what's his orders?" he asked inanely.

Godfrey ignored the query. "Where's the rest? Where's Boone Dawson?"

York shrugged, bringing a grimness to Jake Godfrey. Then York's eyes slitted and he swung on Godfrey. "Purty tough, Jake, droppin' a pilgrim here amongst the gunsmoke an' the daisies. Give him a break an' take him back."

"He bought a job," said Godfrey, "an' he's keepin' it."

Then a smile broke over Jake's face. "She's yours, son!" he clipped, gripping Brett's hand. "Good luck!" And with no more than that he galloped across the meadow and spurred up the slant. At the top he halted to fling his hand high, then he vanished.

"I'll need good luck," reflected Brett.

York turned with sharply aroused interest. "You shore will, brother. What's first on yore list?"

"This outfit's burdenin' yore chest, York," said Brett. "What's the lowdown?"

"Advice is mostly wasted," the man said. "But the Lazy G is dynamite, savvy? Even Jake's scairt to spend time on it."

"He's a busy gent," defended Brett.

"Hogwash!" snorted York. "He's busy skirtin' trouble. The Lazy G's all he's got in the world. Losin' that, he'll ride out. An' he'll lose it! You can't stop that. This country don't belong to weak cowmen or strangers. You'd best get out before they get back."

In so many words he was telling Brett that if he stayed, this was the end of the trail, and it came to Brett with a start that only yesterday he had been praying for such an end.

Now that he faced it, he found no savor in the thought. In him were the beginnings of a new will to fight, a will to plant his feet on the ground and say: "This place is mine!"

"I'm stayin', York. Stayin' till hell's gates swing wide!" His shoulders settled. "What side of the fence you on?"

"Me?" grinned the cowboy. "Nobody's found out yet, so why should I tell? Bein' half fool myself I'm partial to fools. Beyond that I'm tongue-tied."

"A doubtful comfort when I face showdown with Milt Standage."

York started as if Brett had slapped him. Swiftly impulsive, he stepped in, probing Brett's shirt as if for a lawbadge. "Say," he demanded, "who are you, anyway? What you lookin' for? What do you know?"

Suddenly York turned, his eyes seeking the rim. Four riders sat their ponies there etched against the sky. Then they were plunging down recklessly, with wild coyote yippings.

And Brett was suddenly asking himself: "Why the hell am I here?"

Then the calm, cool voice of his conscience told him why. He was in Jake's debt. The little cowman had fed him and outfitted him with money wrenched from these hard hills. Jake Godfrey alone had treated him like a man, shunted him off the trail to hell and given him a fighting chance. And a Killeen paid up.

A new warrior light blazed in Brett's eyes. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Troubled Trails

THE four riders thundered to the barn and York strode over to talk with them. Brett caught no words but he sensed the sullen stiffness of the four as they regarded him narrowly. Then a lithe, bow-legged man lifted his voice.

"Jake thinks he can get away with this, does he?" And he came pumping toward Brett, his three dusty companions following close.

Brett said: "Boone Dawson," to himself and waited.

Even at a distance he disliked the man's swagger and show of authority. As the gap closed the man's features stood out. He was straight as a lance, and possessed of a weasel face and sinister shoe-button eyes. Dangerous, ruthless and deadly to cross, to judge by the sign. His glance was direct as a bullet and his slender hands brushed the butts of two guns as he walked.

The three behind him were fit companions—gunmen all and admirably suited to the sinister business that poisoned the air of these hills. Brett knew only contempt for their kind, tempering it now with a certain canny respect for their numbers. In a test of guns, he must surely fail. So he parried their unspoken threat by stepping onto the house porch, his voice cracking authoritively.

"Come here, Dawson! An' don't waste time about it!"

The man lost stride, momentarily confused by Brett's swift attack. Before he could set himself, Brett said: "You're fired, Dawson. You an' your three side partners. Pack up an' clear out. Get your money from Jake."

Brett smiled at the sullen amazement on their faces, then deliberately turned inside. The summary discharge held them mute until the slam of the heavy door broke the spell. Then Dawson broke into violent cursing.

"Come out, damn you!" he bawled. "I'm runnin' this spread, an' none of Godfrey's bootlickers are tellin' me how! Come out here!"

Brett sat down in the house to weather the storm of Dawson's abuse, chuckling at the spectacle the man made of himself. Used to cowing opponents by fear, he now found his bullying tactics had failed him. Weary at last of his raging, he snapped a sullen order to his men and stamped to the horses.

From the window of the untidy kitchen, Brett watched them mount, Dawson in violent argument with York. He heard York's shouted: "You go to hell, Boone!" Which made him wonder about their relationship.

The four spurred away up the valley, without their gear, and away from Crazy Water and their unpaid wages. Frowning, Brett came again to the porch to meet the approaching York.

"Pretty smart," grinned York. "You taken him by surprise, but it won't last. If you see the sunset tonight, take a good look at it. It may be yore last."

"Mebbyso," agreed Brett. "Saddle two ponies an' show me the lay of the Lazy G!"

"Not me," declined York. "If I ride, it won't be at yore stirrup, brother."

"Bad as that, eh? Well saddle me a hawss. I can't rod this outfit from the front porch."

"Nor the grave," retorted York. "Why don't you—"

"Saddle up!"

York shrugged, wheeled to obey. And five minutes later Brett rode out on the tableland, pausing to blow his mount. York still stood in the ranch yard, staring up at him with a rueful glance.

The trail through the timber was broad and deep-scored with travel. Brett followed it a while, noting the lesser trails leading off at intervals.

In pocket meadows, he found cattle wearing the Lazy G iron, sturdy, well pointed beef stock. Pausing at last to study the tracks of a shod horse quartering across his course, he moved with more caution. The timber thickened, glooming the light and over all the land clung an aching silence that made the skin crawl. So pointed became the unseen threat along the sign of the horse that Brett loosened his weapon and angled back to the trail.

A faint sound struck through his nerves, then he heard shod hoofs on stone. Brett's mount pricked up its ears and suddenly there was a quickening of hoofbeats on three sides closing in on him. A hidden voice said: "Look alive! He's here somewhere!"

Tight-lipped Brett ripped out his gun, reined left sharply and sank his spurs.

Out of the trees he roared, a screaming bullet following him over a sharp ridge top. Too late to swerve away, Brett spotted the man with the loosely-held rifle—

one of the Lazy G trio Brett had fired with Dawson. Startled by Brett's sudden appearance, the man yelped, swung his rifle level.

Brett yelled: "Stop, you fool!" But the killer was intent on lining his sights.

Double concussion echoed along the draw. Brett's pony squealed and went to its haunches. With infinite slowness the Lazy G rider lowered his carbine, ejected the spent cartridge and pitched to the ground. Death robbed his face of all expression.

Brett quit his dying horse. Hoofs drummed behind him and he half expected the blast of gunfire at his back. He dove for a nest of boulders, hit cover and raced to higher ground. Two of Boone Dawson's men loped into view, their pistols gripped.

One shouted: "You get him, Mart?"

Brett called down: "Mart's luck ran out, boys. An' so will yours, unless—" But the two riders weren't waiting. Daring death, they sank the spurs and roared away, riding low to thwart the expected bullets.

BRETT holstered his weapon and dropped into the draw, regret riding him. He had slain and had allowed the witnesses to ride away, thereby pinning himself to the same cross he'd known before. History was repeating itself; the law had it on him again.

"Tasted blood again," he murmured bitterly. "Must like it, in spite of myself!"

He caught the loose pony, started back toward the Lazy G, alone and a little awed by a mystery black as night. He was both troubled and stirred by this strange, almost alien will to fight back.

The sun lowered behind the tumbled western ridges and blue meadows crept in from the prairie country. Once Brett glimpsed what appeared to be the rim above the Lazy G. It proved to be just another in the maze of finger-like ridgebacks so confusing to him now in the gathering dusk. A chill night wind blew in the dank promise of mountain fog. It all looked the same, and Brett had to admit then that he was lost.

The rising echoes of hoofbeats sent him to cover. In the brush he waited, his gaze focused on the lone rider traveling fast. It was York, and Brett stifled an impulse to yell at him. But something about the man's purposefulness and the carbine carried across his saddle constrained Brett to hold silent and, when York had passed, he followed.

Black night settled but the wind in his face threw back sounds of the man's reckless riding, until, with startling suddenness those sounds were blotted out. Puzzled, Brett edged his mount ahead.

A steep descending rampart made him pause, and it carried upward the sounds of York's descent. Brett smiled. York had led him back to the Lazy G, where yellow bars of light showed on the valley floor. Brett started confidently down the steep trail, pausing only as York loosed a Cheyenne yell and a sharp voice barked questioningly. Then a broader light beam showed as someone opened a door and York's rugged form was silhouetted against the glow.

His voice came plainly: "H'are yuh, Milt."

And there came the surly voice of Milt Standage. "Oh—you? What's got into you, York? What about that snooper of Jake's?"

York's reply was cut off by the closing door. But at once another door opened and a full-throated feminine voice called. "York! York!"

A man's heavy voice commanded: "Lea! Back inside an' close yore yawp —before I close it for yuh!"

Brett knew then that this was not the Lazy G. He knew he should turn about and leave. But, for no good reason at all, he was moving down into the bowl.

more certain than ever before that these hills were the end of his long trail.

Here he would live in peace, or he would die fighting for something he sensed in that unseen woman's cry. He knew not which. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

King of the Hills

AT the bottom Brett dismounted and went ahead on foot, straining eyes and ears. He could make out the dim shapes of scattered buildings—a substantial log house, big barn and long rambling bunkhouse. The noisy chattering of the creek prevented his hearing voices but likewise it smothered sounds of his movements as he crossed the little footbridge into the dooryard.

There was the rumble of talk now, and occasional curses. A woman sobbed in a smaller cabin off to his left and Brett groped toward it, feeling his way through a thick gray pall of fog settling down from the rim. He felt a sense of unreality about it all, a cloying mystery. And then abruptly out of that mystery now came a swift curse that made Brett whirl. From the murk a formless snarling figure hurtled. And a vagrant light beam shimmered on a gleaming blade.

Lunging convulsively, Brett closed with the figure. His fingers locked that plunging knife arm. It took all his aroused faculties to hold the man he'd grappled. There was no chance to draw a gun, no chance to strike a blow. He had writhing, twisting death in his two big hands and dared not let go.

The man was now shrilling for help. "Milt! I got him! Come a-runnin'!"

Desperately, Brett strove to throw his adversary. But the man resisted his every thrust. He was slippery as an eel. The knife point pricked Brett's arm. He brought his knee up, but the man swung away, his knife always a menace. Then lanterns flashed and boots pounded. Lights played wanly through the fog, encircling Brett, and Milt Standage was laughing.

"All right Pete. Let him go!"

A whisper of cocking guns ran the circle and Brett set his lips grimly. There was no mercy here, he knew. He saw the cruel face of Boone Dawson and the twisted features of the Lazy G riders he had let ride from under his gun. York was there, too.

With a quick set of his muscles, Brett hurled the relaxing knife fighter from him. With but one thought in mind—make a try for Milt Standage, king of the hills. An evil king, who must go so that peace might reign once more.

Even as he whirled, his right hand scooping down, Brett froze. A woman stood before him, lithe and shapely and so wistfully beautiful it struck Brett like a blow to find her here. She was like a pillar of fire against a furtive and sinister backdrop. Her straight-gazing eyes were deep pools mirroring poignant pain, long suffering and stalwart battle. Brett gasped, and knew then, in a sudden rush of clarity, why he had heard the call of these hills, why he would remain, fighting to the last breath.

She must have read his thoughts, for the tempo of her breathing changed and color touched her full cheeks. Tigerishly she swung on Milt Standage. And it took her defiance to show Brett her resemblance to Standage.

"If there's another killing here, Milt, I'll drag the name of Standage into the dust of this range!" she snapped. "I've had enough!"

The knife fighter, thin-faced youngster, cursed: "Damn you, Sis! Get back to the house before I—"

He slid toward her and York laughed brittly: "I wouldn't, Pete!" And his six-shooter hammer clicked back.

Young Pete Standage whirled on him, a deadly light in his black eyes. But Milt cried: "Enough! Drop it, all of you! Limpy, take Lea away." He stepped in and lifted Brett's gun. "Pete, take this feller to the house."

"Why the house?" snarled Pete. "Do it here! Snoopin', wasn't he? An' for no good. Only a damn fool goes soft now."

The savagery of this kid was chilling to Brett. But there was no mistaking Milt. He took one fierce step toward Pete and the youth caved. Then the whole group was in motion. A crippled man limped up to lead Lea away. Pete spat a curse at the coldly grinning York, shoved Brett roughly to the cabin door, and inside.

It was a big room, rough but comfortably furnished. Curtains adorned the windows and other feminine touches served only to remind Brett of the troubled girl outside. A half dozen men crowded in behind them. Among them was Boone Dawson, a vicious smirk on his evil face.

Milt cracked out an order. "Get out, all of you! I'll handle this!"

All obeyed but York, who still smiled at Pete. Milt let them stay. Limpy came in and said to York: "She's all right." And with York's relieved sigh, Brett gaged the strange rider's love for the girl, and thought better of him.

Milt's eyes smouldered on Brett. He said: "Sit down, Killeen!"

York sneered, "Royal family's in session now, Brett. King Milt, Prince Pete an' Limpy, the court jester!"

"The King part's right!" snarled Milt. "The rest ain't funny. Shut up!"

York subsided, grinning coldly. Then Milt Standage swung on Brett. "Tell the truth, Killeen! Why are you in these hills? That down-an'-out play you made back there in the Bullhide Saloon didn't wash. You got a reason for comin' here—what is that reason?"

"Not bein' long on Christian charity," answered Brett, "you wouldn't understand. I asked for a job. I got one with Jake Godfrey. I'm runnin' his Lazy G, savvy?"

"Cripes!" snapped Pete. "Make an end to him! I'll—"

"Shut up!" snarled Milt. "Yo're a blood-thirsty fool an' always will be! Killeen admitted bein' from Deerlodge, didn't he? An' he murdered one of Jake Godfrey's own crew. This is business for the sheriff—not the undertaker. Our hands stay clean, an' Jake's fangs is drawed. Take him out an' lock him in the saddle shed."

"An' a fool comes to his end!" sighed York, following Limpy and his prisoner through the foggy dark.

Near the saddle shed, the dark cowboy veered away toward the smaller house where Lea Standage had gone. That tormented Brett as much as the gun in his back.

LOCKED in the dark saddle shop, Brett tried to think. But always his mind returned to Lea Standage and her fiery defiance of her brothers. In that moment, something had changed inside Brett. He was more then ever aware of his loneliness. His old helplessness was gone. Even from the one brief glimpse of Lea Standage's beauty, he was jealous of York. And at the same time he was cursing himself for having blundered into this trap.

He thought of Milt Standage. How like that other dictator he was—dreaming of power and wealth and domination. But Brett's gun had stopped all that—and Brett had paid his bitter price. Yet, like that other, earlier one, death alone could frustrate him. Brett knew he must kill Milt if the slightest opportunity presented itself. Kill him, or go back to Deerlodge. And he knew he must kill Pete with him,

for Pete already had Brett marked for death. Destroy two brothers, and forever damn himself in the eyes of the only girl he had ever seen that he really wanted.

Morosely, Brett waited out the dark minutes. Somewhere a door slammed and Milt's orders rang out. Boots slogged across the yard. Spurs jingled, and after while a cavalcade roared across the wooden bridge and was gone.

Limpy slumped down outside the door and cigarette smoke stung Brett's nostrils. Before long Limpy called: "Who is that?"

"Me—York!"

"What yuh want?"

"Gimme a match, Limpy!" Then there was the sound of a dull, thudding blow, a groan, and York's bitter laughter.

The lock rattled, the door swung. "Come out, Killeen!" York called.

Brett stepped into the dank void of night. No lights showed. York's hand found him, steered him toward two pawing horses.

A shadow loomed before Brett and York said: "You got Lea to thank for this, Killeen!"

Then Brett was looking into the girl's oval face, framed in the upturned collar of a heavy coat. Her fingers found his.

"Listen, Brett Killeen," she murmured. "Don't be stubborn, where stubbornness is death. You're alone and you haven't a chance. I know this outfit—the ruthless brutality of my brothers under Milt's burning ambition. But I'm different. I hate it, hate the men Milt has with him. And I can see that you're different, too. Jake Godfrey has no right to ask of you what he fears to undertake for himself. I'm releasing you so you can ride to safety, or to—to death. Which will it be?"

Brett sensed a strange eagerness in her. He said: "I have my job to do, ma'am."

Excitedly York cried: "To hell with that job, Killeen! You listened to Godfrey an' I've listened to Lea Standage. That puts us on the same side of the fence. Our way leads out!" And then as emotion choked him: "I'm through ridin' these hills forever!"

The girl touched his cheek. "That's as I want it, York. These hills are poison to decent men. Milt's stronger; he'll drag you down. Take Brett and ride far away."

York laughed, folding her hand in his. "Leavin' right now, girl. Pack yore possibles an' we'll be long gone by big daylight."

Very deliberately she disengaged her fingers. "York," she said, tightly. "I'll never leave—with you. That's final."

Breath gusted from York's mouth, like a man fatally hit. "But—but Lea," he stammered. "Yesterday we agreed—we planned—" Then with a tragic slumping of his shoulders: "Oh, I reckon I savvy. However you want it is law with York."

Emotion rioted in Brett as he watched. York was big in that moment, big and yet utterly pitiable. It was apparent that he worshipped Lea—and in doing so gave life to the most honest impulse of his life. He was taking defeat like a man—standing up. Yet, for all his admiration of the man, Brett could sense that his own coming had somehow influenced the girl. He saw the broody compassion go out of her, her chin lift in pride and her lips turn to a gentle line.

"York," she said, "is the best friend I have on earth, Brett. Take care of him."

"I'll give him the best the Lazy G affords," he told her and saw her face fall. "But what of you, ma'am? Turning me loose thisaway won't set so good with those brothers of yours."

"You must hold back thoughts like that," Lea murmured, turning away.

"Nothin' to hold me back now," grumbled York as if to himself. "Now I can pay off Milt an' Pete, in lead."

Suddenly, the fire went out of the girl and she bowed her head. "I know they deserve it, York," she said, composed and

pale. "When dad died, Milt took over. From then on, he seemed changed, like a madman. Pete always has aped him, going him one better. They dream of ruling these hills and they'd rather die than fail. But don't try to balk them, York. If they should kill you, I—I—" her voice broke. After a time she tilted a tear-stained face to the sky: "Oh, get out of the hills, both of you." She paused, listening. "Go now! They're coming back!"

As if the rain were coming through the timber, a gale of hoofbeats poured down the valley. Brett laid his fingers gently on the arm of the girl.

"I won't be forgetting what I owe you for tonight, Lea," he said fervently. "And payment may not be long in coming."

Two swift steps took him to his horse and into the saddle. York was holding Lea tightly, hungrily against him. Nor did she resist when he kissed her.

"Good-bye, honey," he murmured.

"Bless you, York," she sobbed. "No one else could have helped me in this."

York put her from him, straddled his pony and whirled away into the fog, Brett following with loose reins. After awhile, they began climbing, leaving the sound of horses being saddled at the Standage ranch. And the sound of men's deep and full-throated cursing.

"Where we bound?" demanded Brett, when they were lined out on a trail through the timber.

"To hell—with long spurs!" rapped York. "Me an' you, we ain't leavin' these hills, feller. If I read you right, you don't scare worth a plugged nickel. All right, neither do I. I'm takin' you back to the Lazy G. To slaughter, mebby, but I'm stayin' with you till the last cap is cracked. What's good enough for Lea is shore good enough for York!"

His voice broke, and Brett suffered with him, yet thrilled at the promise embraced in York's words. York's grief and the memory of those brown eyes in the semi-gloom made a grim judgment easy for Brett to make. Fleetingly, he thought of the price—prison. It wasn't too high. He felt now he knew why Jake Godfrey had hired him. He wouldn't let the old man down. He'd kill Milt Standage, and then gladly resign a life that should just be beginning.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Devil's Cavalcade

THE Lazy G was dark, abandoned. York put up the ponies and Brett got supper, but neither had an appetite. Brett sucked a cigarette, eyeing the strangely morose man across the table.

He said: "Tell me about her, York!"

York seemed relieved to unburden. "You saw her," he said simply. "She's good, Brett—too good for me, or you. She's livin' through hell because of Milt's savagery, an' Pete's. Yet she won't leave 'em, 'cordin' to the promise she made her dyin' dad. Someday she'll turn her back—an' die. Naw, I'm not crazy. They're just that bad. Milt's a devil, Pete's a snake. Limpy's good to her but he's smashed inside an' no protection. It's up to me an'—lissen! What's that?"

He snuffed the lamp. Distant hoof echoes bespoke a lone rider coming swiftly. They went outside, hands near their guns. The hoofbeats faltered. Then came the crash of a falling horse, and a pony squealing!

A voice called weakly: "Brett! York. . . !" And died off into silence.

"Lea!" Brett cried her name as he led the way. York plowed behind him, grunting to keep up, and Brett let him go to the huddled figure of Lea Standage. He contented himself by putting a bullet into the brain of the broken-legged pony before following York and his silent burden back to the house.

York laid the girl on a bunk, making

haste to apply a dampened neckscarf to the ugly bruise on her temple. "Damn a country," he raged, "that forces its terrors onto gals! She's took a nasty spill. Lea, wake up! Lea!"

The girl stirred, her lids fluttering, then, after a moment she sat up, talking swiftly. "When Milt got back and found you two gone he threatened to kill me. Then he lit out for here with his gun crew. I cut across the hills. . . . Brett! York! Please go. Time's so dreadfully short!"

Brett agreed. "Time is short. Take her out of this, York. Get her into Crazy Water, then keep ridin'—the two of you."

A mirthless laugh came to York's lips, then abruptly died. "You must be deaf, feller," he said, acridly. "You musta heard her say she wouldn't leave these hills with me. But she will with you—eh, Lea?"

For a moment the girl looked away, miserably. Then she murmured. "I—I can't help it, York. . . . You're so dear to me, but the minute I saw Brett, I knew that . . . . Oh, how can I make you understand, when I don't understand it myself? Yes, I'll ride out of the hills with Brett; I'll—" And a burst of dry sobs wracked her slim body.

Brett fought off a moment's dizziness. He saw a lot of things then—things that a woman will bury in her heart to grieve over in the silent midnight. It thrilled and humbled him, as he bent over the girl, trying to comfort her, to be worthy of her.

"I understand, Lea," he murmured. "How can I be worthy of it?"

"Take me away, Brett," she said wearily at last. "After this there is no going back to my brothers. But hurry—hurry!"

York turned to the door, threw it open, battling a hurt too poignant to contain. There he paused, his startled gasp stirring Brett to quick movement. Dawn was breaking, the first hard violet light pressing back the gloom. The fog was lifting to reveal riders piling over the rim, with Milt and Pete Standage leading the way.

"Showdown coming," muttered Brett. "And better than running, at that."

"Heaps better," agreed York, taking one wistful look at the dark hills, the click of his cocking gun ominous. He laughed shortly. "I've lived a lifetime in my thirty years an' there's no one to mourn at my grave now. Come on, you hounds of hell!"

He shoved back into the house for rifles and shells. And Lea pressed against the wall, horrified. Nor could Brett conjure up a way to comfort her.

The riders hit the flat, thundering to surround the house. Milt Standage's harsh voice lifted.

"In the name of the law, Killeen, come out! If you don't. . . !"

"Your law," shouted Brett, "don't weigh more than your guns, Standage!"

"Rush him!" bawled Pete. "Burn the shacks to the sills!"

Brett turned to look at Lea. She was white, trembling, bracing herself against the wall. The girl was close to collapse, and no wonder. York, too, was looking at her as if it were to form a last impression. The eyes of the two men met. York blinked, handed Brett a carbine. Brett levered in a shell, whirled and stepped onto the porch.

"Standage!" he pleaded. "Your sister's here! Let York take her over the rim. Then we'll play it out—you and me."

A mocking laugh answered him. "Lea's with you, eh? Good! She's made her bed; let her lie in it. An' as for York, he's a skunk-striped traitor!"

Brett in sudden rage fired point blank at Milt. He missed in the deceptive light and the renegades poured lead.

Brett whirled back inside, untouched by lead, but seething by the sheer brutality of these men who would rule the hills. Outside a volley thundered and lead smashed the walls, shattering panes and whining through the house.

Danger brought fresh courage to Lea.

She crossed the room, swept a carbine from the table.

"The name of Standage hits a new low today, Brett," she said tightly. "I'm ashamed of my crying a few minutes ago. But I'll never be ashamed of what I said or feel. Make your fight!"

There were things he wanted to tell her then; mayhap this was his last chance. But time was precious with those slugs searching them out.

Almost reverently he touched her hair. "Flatten out somewhere, little partner," he smiled, and then turned to the front to answer York's insistent call of, "Here they come a-foggin', feller!"

BRETT went to his knees at a corner window that commanded a broad sweep. Slashing out the glass, he lay down a slow, well-aimed fire that emptied two saddles and broke the charge. York was triggering rhythmically. And when the horsemen had found cover, he called: "All right, partner?"

"Hide-whole, feller! And you?"

"Nicked in the laig, but I'll do. They're comin' again!"

Afoot now, the Standage crew debouched through the dawn, taking advantage of every bit of cover as Milt's blasphemy drove them on. A leaden hornet stung Brett's shoulder. He flinched, missed and fired again as a man dove for a window. Brett's bullet found him, turned him blundering blindly into the wall, dead on his feet.

Boots thundered on the porch, and the door smashed open. Muzzle flame leaped from the table, where Lea Standage was busy shoving fresh shells in a carbine. The intruder paused, stared stupidly, one hand clawing for support, and pitched headlong. The others beat a hasty retreat. Brett stepped over the dead man to close the door, suddenly pitying the girl and cursing Jake Godfrey for planting him here to ignite this hell. Jake was having his breakfast now, safe from the shambles of what was once a great outfit.

Through a lull came a voice, hotly rebellious. "I'm through, Milt. I won't crack another cap with Lea in there!"

"Me too!" sang out someone. "I'm bad, mebby, but not that bad!"

"Yellow dogs!" raged Milt. "Turnin' soft over a purty face!"

"Kill 'em!" screamed Pete Standage. "Drill the sons—!"

"They're crackin' up!" gloated Brett. But York didn't answer as he lined the sights of his carbine. His finger twitched and the room rocked with gun-sound. Yonder a body rolled clear of a boulder, clawed at the ground and lay still.

"Pete Standage," sighed York, "was a snake. Now he's a notch!"

Hoof echoes lifted as horsemen made a run for the rim trail. York lined his piece; Brett slapped it aside.

"Let 'em go, York. They'll scatter after this. Milt ain't with 'em. Stick with Lea, feller. I'm takin' the air." York tried to grab him, but Brett swung through a window and sped across the yard. Milt Standage, from the shelter of an outbuilding, flung a wild shot at him, and ran for the barn. Brett swerved into the front of the stable as Milt ducked into the rear. Both came to an instant halt, their guns loose in their hands, their chests heaving—and only fifteen paces between them.

Milt wore a blue shirt with big white buttons on the pockets. Brett riveted his attention on the one over his heart. It was a vivid target.

Brett actually felt the renegade's weapon rise. He saw the lithe torso sway and dip. Some detached sense picked up two distinct shots and their echoes washing faintly against the rocky ramparts. Then all was still.

Milt Standage still stood there, his eyes still glaring, his gun still dangling. Brett tried to focus that button again, but it was gone.

Milt's mouth twisted strangely. "Killeen!" he cried. "For God's sake—" Then he toppled, and moved no more.

Brett let the air from his lungs. The old gun-magic was still part of him, but he felt no pride in it as he holstered his weapon and half turned. Then he saw York standing in the barn doorway, a smoking weapon in his fist.

He was struggling for the meaning to that when Lea Standage darted in to stare at her dead brother, and at the coldly grinning York. Then she turned with an unvoiced misery and stared into Brett's eyes.

That look froze Brett's blood. For it told him that even in winning, he had lost. In bringing peace to these hills he had slammed the door on the peace he sought. He shook with a bitter chuckle and his lips framed the old prophecy. "As ye sow, so also shall ye reap!"

From York came strange words. "Don't look at Brett, Lea. He's a rotten shot. I killed Milt, just as I killed Pete. They had it comin'."

Shocked, Brett cried. "Stop that, York. Stop talkin' thataway!"

Lea's face was pathetic as she went to York, as she took the smoking gun from his fingers. Her voice was thin, hopeful but unbelieving. "York! It was—*you?*"

Hard lines lay along York's nostrils. His voice was choked. "I done it, Lea. Ask Limpy. He saw it all."

Not until then was Brett aware of the crippled Standage. He stood in the doorway, his face contorted, his fingers digging into his bleeding shoulder. Miserably, he inclined his head.

"It's like York says," he conceded. "An' all for the best, I reckon. Milt was my brother, but he was bad." He sat down suddenly and Lea ran to him.

Enormous suspicion edged Brett's voice. "Who shot you, Limpy?"

Limpy rolled his eyes up, faintly smiling. "Pete," he mumbled. "Pete shot me, 'cause I wouldn't smoke up the house, with Lea in there."

Brett caught York's bitter, triumphant eyes upon him and knew the cards were stacked against him. His glance, warm again, went to Lea, where she mothered the suffering cripple.

Limpy said: "Don't worry, Sis. I won't die. I'll live to see peace in these hills, thanks to two fightin' men. Look—hawss-backers comin'!"

Rocks were clattering down the cliff, then riders hit the flat and came galloping up. Jake Godfrey was in the lead, then the sheriff and a score of men. Godfrey took one look and swore. "Cripes! What hit the Lazy G?"

"Best forget yore business here, Mace," Limpy said slowly. "Yore witnesses are dead an' me—I aim to tell the truth if I'm crowded."

The lawman gulped, nodded. His change of countenance mirrored a personal loss. First of all a politician, he said: "So-o-o-o! Milt put one over onto me, eh? Well, I'm beat!"

"Don't say I didn't tell yuh, Sheriff," said Jake Godfrey. "An' any time you bring charges against my new partner—Brett Killeen—you wanta be advised."

Lea Standage gave a little cry and came to Brett. His arms went about her. She clung to him, sobbing: "Partner in the Lazy G, Brett. I'm glad for you. Now you won't have to leave my hills."

"Our hills," corrected Brett softly, turning his eyes to the rim as a wild yell came tumbling down. A lone horseman paused atop the rampart, eyed the familiar scene for a long minute, then flung high his hand. Hail and farewell!

"Poor York!" breathed Lea. "I hope he finds happiness!"

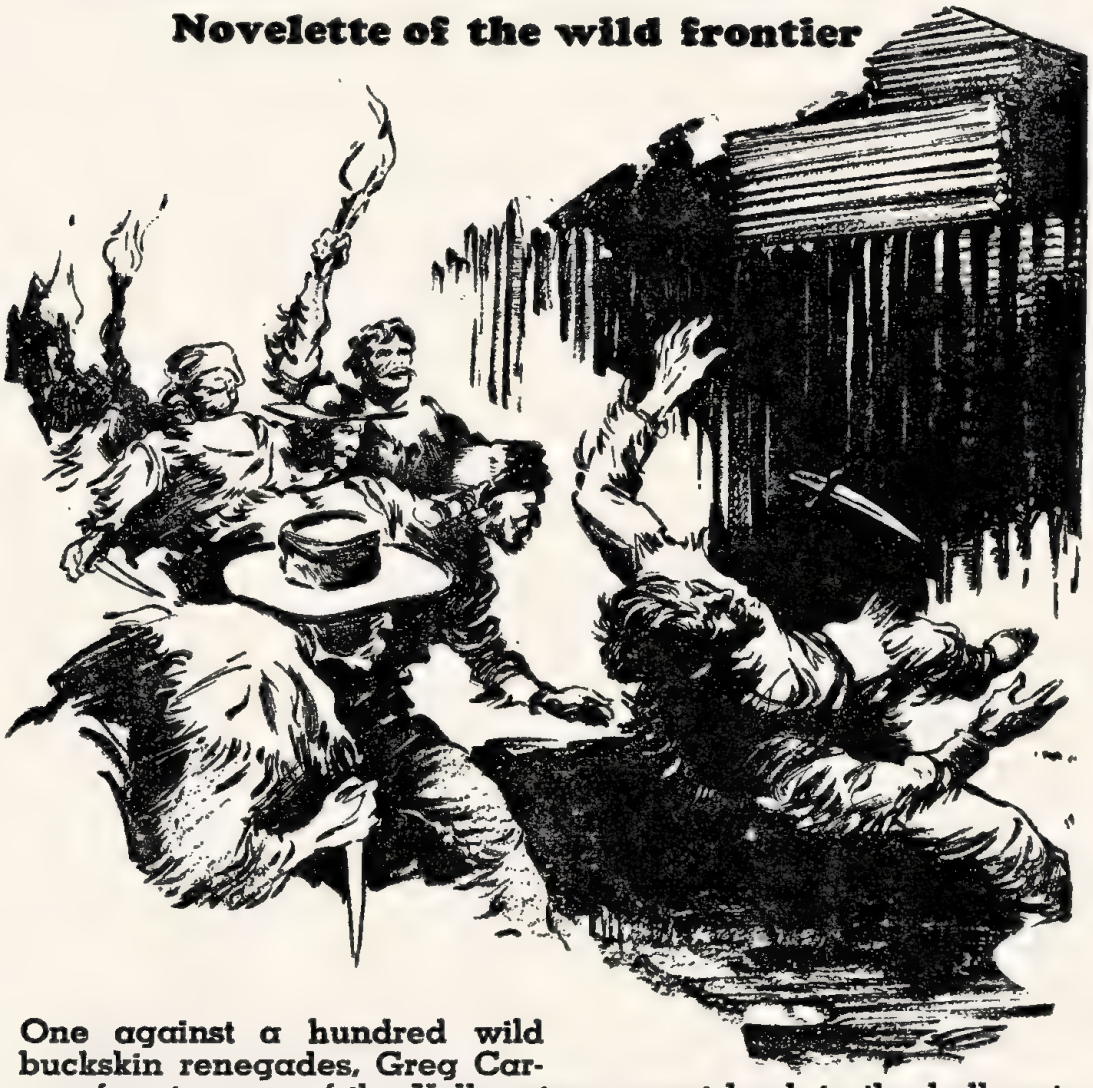
"He will," murmured Brett. "There's an old saying that just proved itself to me: 'As ye sow, so also shall ye reap.'"

THE END

A BUCKSKIN

By Ed Earl Repp
(Author of "Tinhorn's Boothill Gamble," etc.)

Novelette of the wild frontier



One against a hundred wild buckskin renegades, Greg Carson, free trapper of the Yellowstone, went back to the hell-post from which he'd once managed to escape. For the future of a far-flung fur empire rested in the fighting power of his strong arms—which first must bring freedom to a brave daughter of the wilderness trails. . . .

THE wild beats of a *voyageur chanson* floated out over the wilderness in rhythm with the measured dip of powerful paddle strokes. Down the churning flood waters of the Yellowstone a small canoe pitched and rolled in the rushing current. Caught in the force of a swirling eddy, it rose half out of the water, then dipped down again, shooting a spray of white foam high above the gunwales, then it was held on an even keel by the expert paddles of the two men squatted in either end.

Greg Carson, with his partner, old

A BUCKSKIN REBEL GOES TO WAR

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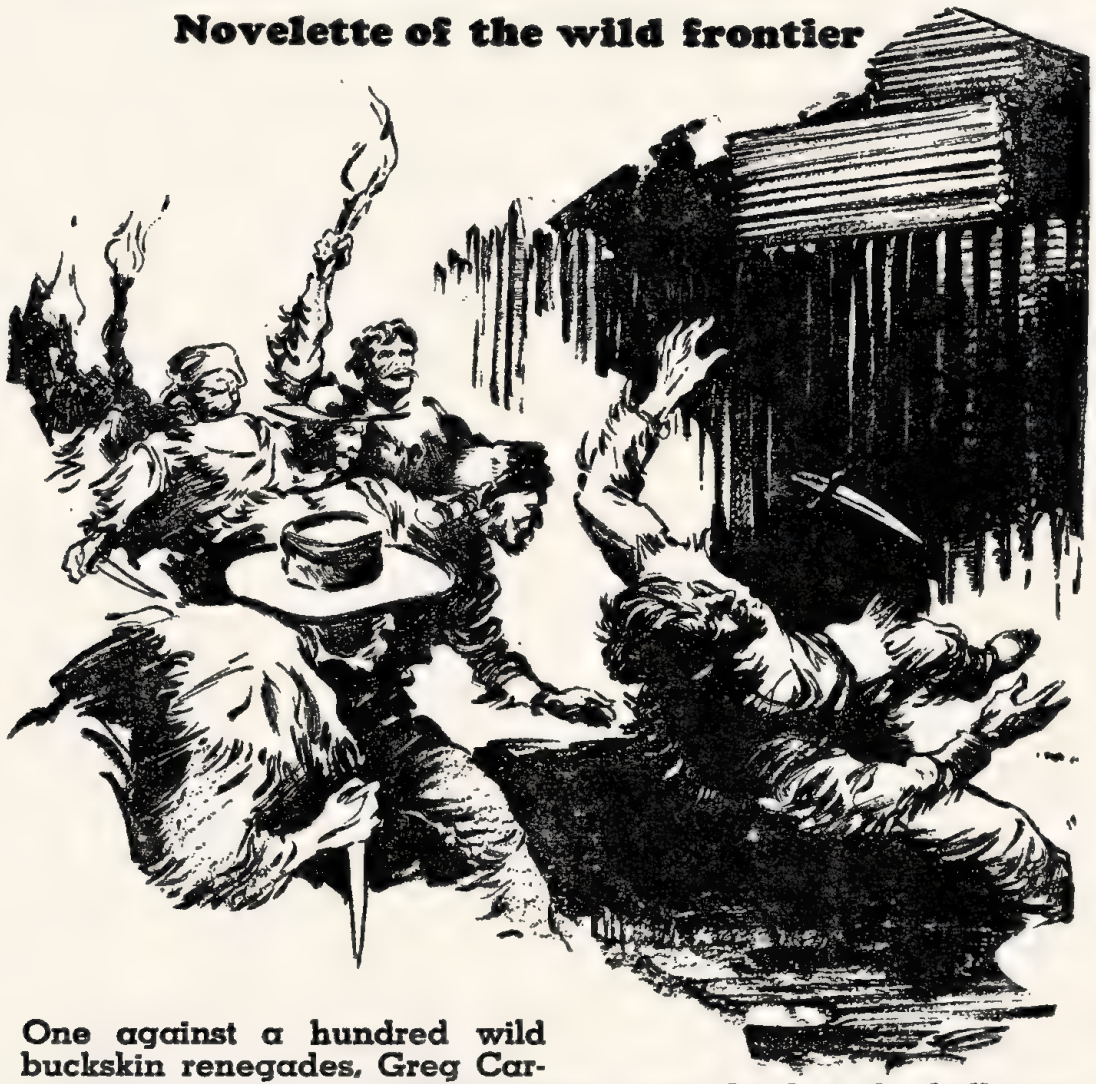
Novelette of the wild frontier



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Greg Carson, with his partner, old Beavertail Maxon, was coming back to civilization, after a winter of successful trapping in the wilds of the upper Yellowstone.

The savage chant that burst forth from his powerful lungs echoed the carefree spirit that ruled his being. Fast-melting snowbanks fringed the shore and quaking aspen and willows shot forth their buds in salute to the newly awakened spring season.

Back in the timber a blue jay ruffled his feathers and scolded raucously at the passing canoe. A beaver brought his tail down on the water with a resounding slap and then dived to safety, leaving a widening ring of ripples where he disappeared.

As Greg's song rose, the leathery-faced oldster in the prow scowled more deeply and slouched down a little farther. Slowly he turned around and peered owlishly at his young partner.

"Tarnation, son," he growled. "No wonder that beaver was scared. You'll be runnin' everythin' out with that bull-beller of yourn—Injuns an' all. An' you ain't had a snort of red likker since we busted the last jug in camp. Blamed if I kin figger it."

A wide grin lit Greg's face as old Beavertail turned and again resumed his paddling. He knew that inwardly the old man

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A wide grin lit Greg's face as old Beavertail turned and again resumed his paddling. He knew that inwardly the old man

was not nearly so put out as he appeared to be.

Always rough in his talk, the grizzled trapper was like a father to Greg, and truly old Beavertail was the only father he had ever known.

His mother had died when Greg was born and pneumonia had taken his father five years later in a lonely trapper's cabin. Beavertail had been old Sam Carson's partner then, and to him fell the guardianship of the orphan. Beavertail had seen Greg grow from a child at the mission at Saint Pierre's to a strapping youth and then to the mighty muscled man that he was now. A man of the wilderness; a frontiersman whom few could equal either in physical prowess or knowledge of the fur trails.

"Cheer up, you old fossil," Greg roared in laughter at the old man's admonishment. "We're comin' back to civilization. You can raise hell again—git drunk with yore cronies. Spin yarns an' blow in all yore fur money for fooforaw an' Injun rot-gut."

"An' I'll betcha all the time yuh'll be trailin' that black-eyed gal of the factor's, an' lookin' like a sick buffalo calf while yo're doin' it," Beavertail cut in. "Beats hell! A healthy young 'un that ought to raise the devil. An' what do yuh do? Go moonin' around that gal."

Greg reddened beneath his beard. "I'll be raisin' the devil, all right," he shot back. "An' we'll have plenty to raise it with. Fur prices sky high, an' we're loaded tuh the gun'nals."

IN SPITE of that, Greg knew that old Beavertail was right. A good deal of his time would be spent with Antoinette Murneaux, dark-haired daughter of the factor of the post. In his dreams Greg had built plans for himself and Toni but there were other young trappers who came to the post, and Antoinette was friendly and cheerful with them all. Always Greg felt a hot surge of jealousy when he saw Toni talking and laughing with another young buckskin clad trapper.

He quickened his paddle strokes. Saint Pierre's fort lay only a few miles ahead. There, after the rivers broke up each spring, trappers gathered with their winters catch to barter for trade goods, to meet old friends, to make new ones and indulge in wild revelry.

From far and wide they brought their furs to this post of the Continental Trading Company. Men could be sure of a square deal from old Jean Murneaux, factor at Saint Pierre's. Indians too brought in their catches and traded them for needed supplies. Friendly tribes of Crows and Blackfeet camped outside the walls of the fort. The gaily bedecked chiefs and the stoic-faced blanketed warriors were free to come and go in and out of the post, for Jean Murneaux was a friend to red man and white man alike.

Banking the little craft on the swift waters they rounded a turn. Far down on the opposite side, several low buildings hove into view.

"By hell an' beavertails!" cackled the old man. "There she is. It's—" His words were snapped off.

The sharp report of a long rifle rolled out over the wilderness and reverberated on the wooded hills. A leaden slug whined over their heads and they ducked to safety in the bottom of the canoe.

"What the hell?" cracked out Greg. "Head into the bank, Beavertail."

They widened their paddle strokes to bring the canoe into a little cove. There they were hidden from the opposite bank. They sat silently for many minutes. Satisfied that they were safe for the moment, Greg moved out cautiously to where he could get a clear view of the other side of the river. Carefully he scanned it, but no movement or unnatural object betrayed the ambusher's position.

"Somethin' damn funny goin' on," he said finally. "And it ain't Injuns, because the ones at the post are friendly. It ain't likely to be fur pirates, either, 'cause they wouldn't be operating so close to Saint Pierre's. Still, that shot wasn't accidental."

"You damn betcha it wasn't any accident," ground out old Beavertail. "An' I'm thinkin' we're goin' to have a hell of a time crossin' if that feller out there's set on beefin' us!"

With growing restlessness they waited there on the bank throughout the waning afternoon, and into the gathering dusk. When complete darkness had obscured the woodland they stole softly into the canoe and put out into the stream. The rhythmic dip of their feathered paddles was lost in the roar of the current. The nocturnal voices of the wilderness went on undisturbed as they made their way across the river to Saint Pierre's trading post. Then a feeling of alarm stole over Greg Carson as they neared the lights that marked the low log buildings. Something was wrong. Wrong as hell!

It was distinctly out of the ordinary that peaceful trappers should be attacked so near a post—especially Saint Pierre's which had always been noted for its lack of violence. Now a sixth sense of apprehension told him to be careful. His long rifle, fully loaded, lay at his knees when they pulled the little boat up to the muddy bank at Saint Pierre's landing.

Then, as suddenly as it had come, the feeling of apprehension vanished. There in the shadows of the post he felt a renewed sense of security. He drew a vast sigh of relief and hopped lightly out of the canoe.

Beavertail climbed out more slowly and then they pulled the bark out of the water and brought it to rest on solid earth.

"You stay here and watch the furs, Beavertail," he spoke almost lightheartedly. "Keep your eyes peeled 'cause we don't want to take any chances. I'll go find Murneaux an' then we'll take care of 'em."

"No you won't," came a low and cruel voice from the shadows. "You'll just stand right where you are and lift yore hands. Yo're under arrest—both of yuh!"

GREG and old Beavertail stood rooted to the ground. Neither spoke for moments, then Greg bit out angrily, "Under arrest? What for?"

"For poachin' on the Continental Tradin' Company's trappin' grounds, that's what," snapped the voice from the gloom. "You ain't denyin' you got furs in that canoe, are you?"

"No, I ain't denyin' it," ground out Greg. "But hell, man, I've been trappin' here for years, an' it's never been called poachin' yet."

"It is now," came the heavy voice again. The man stepped out where the two trappers could get a partial view of him in one of the dim lights from the post. The man was huge and beefy and a heavy matted beard covered his face. An ugly grin curved his thick lips.

"Let me see the factor," demanded Greg grimly.

"You'll see him all right," sheered the big man. "Gaston, Lebec, grab the furs!"

Then, for the first time, Greg saw that the burly trapper was not alone. Two breeds moved stealthily out of the shadows and took possession of the canoe. A savage rush of pent-up anger surged through Greg as they started piling the furs out on the bank.

"Get movin', you two!" the throaty snarl came again, and the pistol in the big, beefy fist waved menacingly, and Greg and old Beavertail Maxon were herded toward the log stockade of the post. Then with a shock Greg realized that something vital he had known was missing from the Saint Pierre's.

Greg could not remember the time when

Indian lodges had not circled the stockade. Now no lodge fires gleamed out through the night; no cur dogs barked and snarled at their approach. A dark and heavy silence greeted them. The silent blackness screamed back at him that things both strange and menacing were happening at Saint Pierre's.

With the feeling of uneasiness mounting at every step they passed through the wide gate of the stockade and into the compound. The dim shapes of the log buildings were outlined in the shadows. Here and there a quiet, furtive figure slithered through the darkness. From only one quarter of the post did any signs of life emanate.

Lights glowed from the windows of the big log building, the post headquarters where old Jean Murneaux had held sway, in the center of the compound. From it, a sound of wild revelry floated out over the night air.

Greg wondered. Had Murneaux been deposed and a new factor put in his place, or had some diabolical change come over the old man? If so what had become of Ioni? Then Greg and his old buckskinned partner were headed through the doorway of the building.

He blinked his eyes a few times to get them accustomed to the lights, and he took in the interior in a broad, sweeping glance. The scene was totally familiar. It had been like this on other years when trappers and mountain men gathered for spring rendezvous. Gaunt, unshaven men in buckskin filled the room. Some were of *voyageur* blood, many were Americans. They drank, laughed, sang and cursed. The lid was off after a winter on the trap lines. But now as Greg and Beavertail entered the room, the hilarity died down and all eyes focused on the newcomers.

Greg searched the faces of the men, seeking one that might be familiar, but he couldn't place one. All were strangers and they all eyed him narrowly, without a trace of joviality or welcome in their cold gazes. They were hard-eyed, renegade types. Greg read it at the first glance.

Now a tall figure moved arrogantly toward them. The man was large, broad shouldered and domineering. He stood out strikingly among the others of the assemblage. He wore the buckskins of a frontiersman but they were not tattered and stained by the rigors of frontier life. They were expensive and shining. On his feet he wore beaded, *parfleche* moccasins. His face was smooth-shaven and his narrow-set eyes were frosty.

"Ah, Dawson," he said in a sneering voice. "You've caught some more, eh?"

"Nabbed 'em red-handed, boss," barked the heavy-jowled man. "Piled to the gun'nals with half the furs in the territory. Told 'em they was arrested for poachin' an' the big feller didn't like it a little bit."

"Hell-on-a-raft, huh?" snarled the first. "That's the way we like 'em. Gives us more fun earin' 'em down!"

GREG stared stonily at the big man facing him. Something told him that he was pleading in vain, but he went on doggedly. "When yo're through with the horseplay, I'd like to see the factor."

A harsh laugh grated his ears. "So yuh want to see the factor!" the fancily dressed man grinned. "Well take a good look, fella, cause you're lookin' right at him. Trent Fenner is the name—factor at Saint Pierre's."

Greg's cold, drawn features betrayed no emotion. "Where's Murneaux?" he snapped curtly.

Trent Fenner shrugged his shoulders. "Who knows," he said. "Saint Looey, probably. That's where he was headed when he an' his gal left here. The Continental relieved him of his post because of incompetence. Murneaux was lettin' every tramp in the country trap on the company's grounds. They got fed up."

"The Continental's always been fair to

free trappers," Greg shot back angrily. "They always came here because they got a square deal. What's the reason for the change?"

"Maybe they didn't know what Murneaux was doin'," Trent Fenner's face contorted savagely. "An' mebbe smart fellers like you would be better off if they didn't ask so damn many questions."

His narrowed eyes burned into those of the tall young mountain man. Greg's cold stare never wavered. Fenner edged back to the side of a table piled high with furs. A big bullwhip lay there, coiled like a black ugly serpent.

Old Beavertail Maxon spoke for the first time. "If you ask me, Greg," he grated, "I think they're a bunch of damn, thievin'—"

He never finished.

With a savage growl Trent Fenner snatched the bullwhip from the table. His arm lashed back; the whip rose high in the air and fell across the whiskered face of the old trapper. The crack sounded like a rifle shot in the quiet room.

Old Beavertail staggered back dazed. He fell to the floor and blood started streaming through his beard. But that blow of the bullwhip unleashed something within Greg Carson. The sight of the grizzled old man on the floor transformed him into a mad, raving savage.

He forgot that there was a man behind him with a gun. He was oblivious to all else save the fact that the ruthless face of Trent Fenner swam before his eyes, and that Fenner had struck that savage lash at old Beavertail.

With a roar Greg lunged at the factor of Saint Pierre's. His mighty arm came back and uncoiled. With all his strength he shot his knotted fist into Fenner's leering face, his blows hammering on the man's jaw. Fenner fell back, too dazed by the furious assault to stage a counter attack. His knees buckled. Greg tore the bullwhip from Fenner's hands and swung it in savage strokes across the cringing form.

Then he was aware of bodies crashing against his own. Strong arms pinned his to his sides. The whip was snatched from his hands and he felt his arms and legs being bound. When his mind cleared again, he was securely tied, hand and foot. Old Beavertail Maxon was at his side, bound in a like manner.

Trent Fenner had revived sufficiently to sit up. His face was a mass of bruised and bleeding flesh. The once shining buckskins were torn by the lashes of the bullwhip and were smeared with blood. He shot an accusing finger at Greg.

"You've fixed yourself now, yuh heavy-handed son," he shouted. "Killin' you would be too easy on yuh. I'll make you wish you'd never seen Saint Pierre's!"

He stood up, wobbly on his feet. "Dawson, Lebec, Carver," he called. "Bring 'em out. I'll teach 'em to fool with Trent Fenner. Fifty lashes apiece—if they last that long! Drag 'em out."

Roughly Greg and Beavertail were pulled from the post headquarters. Burning pitch torches lighted the procession and they moved noisily to the center of the compound to where three posts stood a few feet apart.

Greg winced inwardly at the thought of the whipping. Fifty lashes were enough to kill a man. He might stand it all right, but could Beavertail take the beating? He knew it would be of no use to plead with this ruthless leader for an escape for Beavertail. It would only make the punishment worse.

He came close to the old man as they were hauled along. "Buck up, old timer," he whispered. "Maybe there'll be a way out yet."

Only a fiery defiance shone in the beady eyes of the old trapper. "Let the damn ornery skunks whip us!" he spat. "I'll live to come back an' tear 'em apart, bit by bit!"

THEY were in the center of the compound. Rough hands stripped off their leather shirts. Tough buckskin thongs were tied around their wrists and they were spread between the posts. The light from the torches threw a weird glow on the bloodthirsty gathering. Two burly breeds stood by the manacled trappers, each with a bullwhip in his hand, a blood-hungry gleam lighting their whiskey-reddened eyes, as Fenner shouted orders.

From the corner of his eyes, Greg saw old Beavertail struggling futilely against the restraining buckskin laces. All of the recently-born hatred of this ruthless factor of Saint Pierre's surged anew within him and flamed to white heat. In a flashing instant he recalled his past life with the old trapper. How Beavertail had cared for him, nursed him through fevers more tenderly than he would have his own son. It cut into his heart to see the old man suffering in such a manner.

Now at Fenner's command one of the breeds brought his whip up and laid it across Beavertail's back. The lash bit deep into his bare flesh. Every muscle in his gnarled body quivered.

Greg went wild. With a maddened roar he thrashed and pulled at his bonds. His feet were free and he brought one leg up kicking savagely at a renegade standing near by. Greg's heel caught the man full in the face. He staggered back, howling with pain, his nose broken.

They rushed at Greg and by mass force overpowered him and bound his legs. The renegade with the broken nose walked around in front of Greg. With a curse he lashed his fist at the young trapper. Blood spurted from his nostrils.

Fenner shouted again to start the whipping and with heavily muscled arms the breeds wielded the whips. The black lashes arced up and fell with a resounding crack against the bared backs. Again they rose and cut flesh in deadly unison.

Fenner was calling out the count. "Harder, you black hearted devils!" he shrieked at the sweating renegades. "Make 'em feel it!"

Greg felt the stinging leather sear into his flesh like a burning firebrand but his face remained granite. Out of the corner of his eye he was watching Beavertail. The salty old trapper was giving his best but he was drooping more with every blow.

"Twenty-five," he heard Fenner dimly.

The breeds swung the lashes harder, and gradually Greg became more and more devoid of feeling. His senses were numbed but he held on grimly. Then he saw Beavertail's head drop and sap upon his chest.

After an interminable time he vaguely sensed that the lashes had stopped. Old Beavertail was hanging grotesquely with his arms suspended above his head when Greg heard Trent Fenner give the order to cut them down. He felt himself being released from the whipping post. Then his head cleared a little and Fenner's scarred face loomed before him.

"I'm letting yuh go now," he laughed and indicated the direction of the dark forests of the Yellowstone wilderness. "There's wild animals an' Injuns out there, an' yuh won't be havin' a gun or a boat or food. If yuh figger on comin' back, remember, my guards shoot tuh kill next time." He kicked and spat at the inert form of old Beavertail Maxon. "An' yuh can take this with you!"

Greg raised his pain-racked body up to its full height. You didn't kill me, Fenner. That's where you made your big mistake," he grated. "I'll be back some day, an' when I do—you'll die by inches!"

A grin curved Fenner's bruised lips. "I still got ways of fixin' gents like you." He flashed a signal to his men. "Mebbe a bath would cool 'em off."

Without a word four big renegades rushed him and picked him up bodily. He tried to struggle but in his condition he

was unable to cope with one of them, let alone four. Two more caught up the limp form of the old trapper and the grim procession moved out of the stockade and down the grassy slope to the river. They stopped on the brink of the rushing stream.

Fenner poked his face close to Greg's. "You brought this on yourself, trapper man," he rasped. "Men don't buck Trent Fenner an' get away with it. If you can't figger that out, maybe a little cold water'll help you to think."

Greg felt himself being swung back and forth. Suddenly he was released and he arced out over the river and plunged into the current. A moment later he heard another splash and he knew that Beavertail had also gone in. Then the icy waters closed over him. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Law of the Buckskin Men

GREG CARSON struggled frantically to fight off the overwhelming blackness that threatened to engulf him as he came up and went under for the second time. Finally, by superhuman effort, he managed to keep his head above the surface, fighting the swift water by instinct.

The shocking numbness of the cold removed what feeling he had left in his body. Only one thing was in his mind; he must find Beavertail and rescue him from this icy, swirling hell of the Yellowstone River.

The raging current carried him along with amazing velocity. The moon had now risen and it threw a pale, velvety glow over the surface of the water. Greg strained his eyes through the dim light. Presently he saw a dark object bob to the surface of the stream a few yards ahead. Mustering all of his reserve strength, he forced his cramped and deadened muscles to respond to his will. He lunged toward the old man and caught Beavertail below the arms just before he ducked under.

With his partner locked securely under one huge arm, Greg began the slow and agonizing process of getting to shore. It seemed hours before he finally pulled the bedraggled and unconscious man upon the bank. The current had carried them far down stream. Saint Pierre's lay around a wide, sweeping bend in the river, fully three quarters of a mile away. Even the wild shouts of revelry sounded faint as they drifted over the wooded stillness.

Greg hauled Beavertail out on dry ground, then fell prone beside the old man. For a long time he lay there, exhausted, unable to move. Finally, with a fierce effort, he raised himself up. He fumbled in his watersoaked buckskin pocket and pulled out a watertight case containing sulphur matches. He knew that it would be safe to build a fire there, as it was out of sight of the post. And Trent Fenner, being sure that both trappers had drowned, would not bother sending anyone out to look for them.

The night was cold and Greg shivered in his dripping half frozen clothes. His hands were so numb that he could hardly work his fingers. Agonizing pains shot through his whole body. But he managed to gather some dry wood and soon he had a fire blazing. He laid his old partner down close enough to the fire so that he could absorb every bit of its warmth and still not so close that he would be burned. Occasionally he turned him over so as to keep the heat evenly spread.

As Greg sat there humped over the little blaze his thoughts trailed off to Jean Murneaux and his daughter, Antoinette. Why had the Continental relieved Murneaux of his post? He had always brought good trade for the company both from the white trappers and the Indians. The red men traded only with persons they could trust, and they loved and trusted Jean Murneaux. And what had happened to

Père Charles? Always in previous years, the kindly Jesuit father had been one of the first Greg sought out at spring rendezvous. There in company with the old missionary he would recount the days when he and Toni, as children, had gone to school under the kindly old priest's tutelage. Now he was gone. The Crows and Blackfeet, friends of the sturdy young mountain man, were gone.

When Greg got up to replenish the fire he saw a long streak of gray in the east. The fire had warmed him considerably. His trousers and old Beavertail's buckskins were dry. The old man was still unconscious but his heart was beating strongly. Greg realized that it would not be safe for them to remain so near the post during daylight. They had to go on.

He put out the fire, stooped down and picked up the unconscious oldster. Then he started off very slowly through the coming light.

The day dawned brightly and the sun glorified the early spring morning. It passed its zenith, but Greg never stopped. With the numbness gone, his senses were revived and torturing agony shot through his torn and lacerated body like a burning firebrand. Almost failing at times under his heavy burden, he pushed on, fighting through flooded lowlands, swollen creeks, and dense undergrowth. And with every step his all-consuming fury and his thirst for vengeance increased. Mentally he counted them off—the theft of his furs, the cruel lash across Beavertail's face, the beating at the whipping post, and then the attempted drowning in the flood waters of the Yellowstone. For each one he sowed a seed of indictment against Trent Fenner and took a savage vow to reap a grim harvest in revenge.

He went on, half out of his mind with pain, at times raving deliriously. It was late afternoon when the distant barking of dogs assailed his ears. A little further on he saw smoke spiraling toward the sky. He quickened his shambling stride. Presently, in a little clearing in the trees, a circle of Indian lodges emerged.

Greg was suddenly stricken with a feeling of apprehension and fear. These Indians might be friendly, but what if they proved to be hostile? There were tribes in this part of the country that held a deadly hatred for all white men; warriors who would like nothing better than to have white scalps dangling from the tips of their lances. But Greg's strength was almost spent. He couldn't go on much farther, and it was an even chance that the Indians were friendly. He had to take that chance.

He pushed on and stumbled into the ring of tepees. From every quarter Indian curs slunk away, snarling as they went. Frightened children scurried to cover at the grotesque sight of a half-clad bedraggled white man, carrying another on his shoulder. Squaws peered curiously from behind tent flaps. A few braves started out suspiciously to meet them. Presently Greg saw a tall figure come from the central lodge.

There was something familiar in the proud bearing of the Indian. He moved closer, and then recognition struck Greg. It was Eagle Feather, who had been Greg's great friend in other years at Saint Pierre's. This was a tribe of Crows.

He tried to speed up his clumsy, stumbling gait, but it was of no use, for he was staggering now. An increasing dizziness enveloped his brain and he reeled, then collapsed twenty feet from Eagle Feather's lodge. A heavy blackness folded over him. . . .

LIGHT was streaming through the half-open tent flap when Greg finally awoke to full consciousness. He lay a few moments in a wondering daze before he fully grasped where he was. Then he remembered.

He was not aware that there were

others in the lodge until he heard Beavertail's loud cackle. "An' ten Shoshonies jumped me while I was sleepin' there. One uh 'em come down on me with a tomahawk. The wind from it woke me up an' I dodged just in time tuh miss it. I grabbed the tomahawk outa his hand an split his skull wide open. The rest uh the Injuns is on me now. I takes the tomahawk in one hand an' my bowie knife in the other an' starts clubbin' at 'em right an' left. They go down yellin' an' screamin' tuh beat all hell. Fust thing yuh know they's all lyin' around with not enough left uh 'em tur lift their h'ar."

"Dang yore ornery hide," another voice came back. "Yo're a bigger liar as ever!"

Greg studied the other man. He could not see his face but the voice had a familiar quality to it. The man was of medium height and he wore the full buckskins of a trapper. He squatted on moccasined heels and even from that position, Greg could see that he was very bowlegged. Long, gray hair fell down across his blocky shoulders.

"That ain't nothin', anyhow," the bowlegged trapper retorted. "One time when I was comin' into Fort Laramie . . ." The man went on, trying to beat old Beavertail's story. And in spite of his weakness and pain Greg smiled at the lie-swapping of these two old trappers.

Then old Beavertail Maxon turned around and saw Greg looking at them. "By hell an' by beavertails, Jim," he shouted. "He's come outa it!"

There was a loud whoop from the two men and now Greg got a good look at the one that had just spun the last yarn. Grizzled whiskers covered his gaunt face. Two small, beady eyes sparkled as he regarded Greg stretched out on the buffalo robes on the floor of the lodge.

"Danged if he ain't!" he said. "An' yuh owe me three beaver hides, yuh old rapscallion."

"Jim Bridger," Greg echoed weakly. "Where in hell did you come from?"

"Just happenin' along, an' I see Eagle Feather," said Jim Bridger. "He tells me he's picked up a couple uh no-'ccount white men an' I decides tur look 'em over. An' who do I find but you two. This here ornery cuss," he indicated Beavertail, "is awake an' rarin' tur fight. I damn near have tuh lift his h'ar tuh calm him down. Just the same, younker, I'm durn glad to see you."

The two trappers shook hands warmly. Then Jim Bridger spoke in the guttural Crow tongue to the squaw who had been nursing Greg. "Go tell Eagle Feather the white man wishes to see him." Whereupon the squaw rose and left the lodge.

A few moments later Eagle Feather appeared at the door. He entered and squatted beside the other three.

"My white friend greets the sun this morning," he spoke in the English he had learned at Saint Pierre's. "But it will be many suns before he follows the beaver trails."

"Not many, Eagle Feather," said Greg. "I'll be up 'fore you know it."

"My white friend has seen the evil one at Saint Pierre's," spoke Eagle Feather softly. "The evil one cheats my people. He steals their furs so they will not stay at the post."

"I figgered somethin' like that." All traces of mirth left Greg's features and his face became grim. He turned to Jim Bridger. "What have you found out about this, Jim? Did the Continental put Fenner in Munreaux' place?"

"Dunno for sure, but I'm bettin' a year's catch of plew-prime beaver that they didn't," replied Jim Bridger. "I ain't been to Saint Pierre's. I was headed there an' I run on to a friend of mine in a Nez Perce camp. He told me about the hell that's busted loose there. Told me that Fenner catches the trappers comin' down the river, steals their furs an' kills 'em or whips 'em or whips 'em an' sends 'em out

tuh die. I know this fella's stick floats straight, so I shy clear of Saint Pierre's. The only thing we can do now is warn the trappers 'fore they git there. That's where I was headed when I come upon Eagle Feather."

"Murneaux?" asked Greg. "Did your friend say where he went? Fenner said that he and his daughter went to Saint Louis."

"He told me that Murneaux was goin' to Fort Benton to try to git help from the army," Jim told him. "Mebby he was goin' to Saint Looey from there."

Greg's throat muscles were drawn tight. "Fort Benton!" he said hoarsely. "They could never make it. It's two hundred miles overland. There's hostile tribes swarmin' all through the country. Mostly Teton Sioux, an' they hate the sight of a white man."

ALL the fury of the past few days' experience flamed anew within him. In spite of his aching body he raised himself up on the buffalo robes, eyeing the buckskinned frontiersman levelly.

"Jim," he spoke quietly. "We've got to whip this, an' we—the trappers—we can do it. If Murneaux did get to the army it would be too late; there'd be too much damage done at the post before help could come. It's our job to save the free trappers in the Yellowstone country from Fenner."

"It'll be a tough job, younker," said Jim Bridger gravely. "Fenner's strong as hell. He's got all the renegades in the country with him—over a hundred now, an' more comin' all time."

"There isn't one of us that'd have a chance against Fenner alone," said Greg. "But all of us might do something if we stick together. Fenner isn't only a threat to Saint Pierre's. When he gets strong enough he'll branch out, killing and robbing trappers through the whole territory."

"I'm behind you, younker, in anythin' yuh do!" said Jim. "Right to yore back till yore belly caves in. Jim Bridger ain't never shied clear of a good ruckus yet, an' he ain't aimin' tuh start now!"

"You wasn't figgerin' to cut me outa this, was you?" cut in old Beavertail. " 'Cause if yuh was, you better start figgerin' right over again."

Greg smiled. "Why, you old stove-up, broken-down piece of buzzard bait!" crowed Jim Bridger. "You couldn't whup a sick papoose, let alone the hellions at Saint Pierre's."

"Come outside uh this tepee an' I'll show yuh!"

He started to raise up and then with a groan he dropped back on the buffalo robes.

"Better take it easy, old timer," laughed Greg. "You ain't ready to fight yet. But I reckon I'll have to take you along when the showdown comes." He turned again to Jim Bridger. "Here's what we'll do. You go to the portage above Saint Pierre's as fast as you can. Catch the trappers as they come down and tell 'em what's up. They all think that Murneaux is still at the post. Beavertail an' I came down early this year, so not many of 'em will be in yet. Eagle Feather'll give me runners to go out and scout the other trails an' warn those that won't be comin' down the river. Gather 'em there at the portage an' I'll be along as soon as I can travel. Wait for me there." His pale blue eyes lifted and stared stonily into space. "We'll wipe Fenner and his crew from the face of the earth!"

Jim Bridger rose. Eagle Feather stood up beside him, towering above the smaller form of the buckskinned trapper. The Crow chief had sat in silence throughout the conversation, his beady eyes blinking. Now he spoke to Greg.

"My runners will be ready when my white friend wishes them," he said.

"We want them right away, Eagle Feather," replied Greg. "We haven't any

time to lose. They better start pronto."

"They'll leave within the hour," promised the chief. He moved proudly out of the lodge.

Jim Bridger clasped hands with his two trapper friends. "A trapper's a purty peaceable sort of jigger," he said, "as long as his fur's rubbed the right way. But let him get riled up an' he's mighty cantankerous. I'm thinkin' that maybe Mister Fenner'll have more of a job on his hands than he thinks. We'll be waitin' for you at the portage."

He departed through the low door of the lodge.

CHAPTER THREE

Death Plays a Wilderness Hand

GREG'S strength returned quickly after Jim Bridger left for Saint Pierre's portage. The tough fibers of his muscled body responded readily to the healing herbs and the strengthening broths prepared by the Indian cooks. His back was still sore and aching from the cruel lashes of Trent Fenner's bullwhip, but his savage desire for revenge could not allow him to remain longer. In two days he had recovered sufficiently to travel. Old Beavertail, too, was up and impatient to be on the trail.

Eagle Feather had given them new buckskins. Also they secured food, guns and ammunition from the Indians. A Green River knife hung at each man's belt.

With an expression of gratitude for his hospitality and care, they bade Eagle Feather farewell and started out into the wilderness, traveling in the general direction from which they had come. It was Greg's plan to work their way to the southward, keeping in the high country. They would seek one of the tributaries to the Yellowstone and float down on a raft, striking the main stream just above the portage. It would lengthen the distance, but the going would be far simpler.

A relentless force goaded Greg on. His whole being was transformed into a cold, inhuman machine for vengeance. Only one thing remained now to done: Trent Fenner must go. After that little mattered as far as Greg was concerned.

Perhaps he would leave Montana and seek the fur trails in other parts of the country. There was only a leaden lump where his heart had been, for he was certain that he would never see Antoinette or her father again. If they made the long and hazardous trip to Fort Benton in all probability they would never return to the Yellowstone country, but it seemed impossible that they could make it. Perhaps they had already died. Greg tried to drive the torturing thought from his mind but he could not.

Throughout the morning they fought on farther into the wilderness. At noon they rested for a half hour and made a light lunch of elk jerky.

It was midafternoon when they suddenly looked up and saw a man struggling along a few hundred yards ahead. His slow, plodding gait told them that exhaustion had almost overtaken him. Greg and Beavertail stopped to watch. The man went on a little farther, then fell to the ground. He tried to rise but after a feeble attempt he fell again. This time he stayed down.

Greg sprang into action and in a few moments covered the distance to the fallen man, with old Beavertail following the young trapper.

For a moment Greg wondered at the identity of the man, but when he got closer he saw that the man was clothed in a black robe. Then Greg was at his side and he knelt down.

Gently he picked up the head and shoulders of the inert form and cradled them in his huge arms. He turned the man's head around and looked into the white and

drawn face of Père Charles, the old missionary at Saint Pierre's.

A sharp exclamation of surprise escaped his lips as Beavertail came up panting. "Tarnation, younker!" he said. "You look like you been shot. Who is it?"

"It's Father Charles," replied Greg. "An' it looks like he's about done in."

"Well, I'll be durned!" ejaculated Beavertail. "What in thunder's he doin' way out here?"

"I don't know," said Greg. "But one thing's sure. He's had hard goin'."

The robes of the old priest were tattered and torn. His moccasins were worn almost through and his feet were cut and bleeding. His gray hair was matted and in his face were shown the gaunt lines of extreme hunger.

Slowly the old man opened his eyes and stared unknowingly a long time before recognition dawned on him. Finally, with great effort, he moved his lips.

"Greg Carson!" he murmured weakly. "My son!"

"Father Charles," said Greg huskily. "You've been traveling a long and hard trail. . . ." And as the old man struggled for words, Greg interrupted him. "You're too exhausted to talk now, Father Charles. Rest a while an' I'll get you somethin' tuh eat. Then you can talk."

Greg found pine boughs and spread them out in a soft mat. Then he put the old missionary down gently on them. He fed him a little bit of the elk jerky and in a little while Père Charles had strengthened himself sufficiently to talk.

"What happened to them—to Antoinette?" asked Greg anxiously. He waited in dreaded silence for the old Jesuit to speak.

"Jean Murneaux is gone," began Father Charles. "I laid him to rest two days ago. Antoinette—" Père Charles was seized with a violent coughing spell. Greg's breathing stopped while he waited for him to continue.

"Antoinette," he spoke again, "is at Saint Pierre's. She is being held there—by Trent Fenner!"

A sudden mixture of gladness and grave apprehension surged within Greg. Toni was alive and only a few miles away. But Trent Fenner . . . Perhaps she had been there the very night he had withstood the whipping in the compound.

Suddenly he knew that the die was cast. He would not meet Jim Bridger and the other trappers there at the portage. He had to go back to Saint Pierre's as quickly as possible. He would find some way of rescuing her from Fenner. Then suddenly he thought of Père Charles. He could not leave him here to die.

He listened on as the old missionary related the happenings at the post. How Trent Fenner had come to the post to work as an assistant to Jean Murneaux. One by one, Fenner had brought his renegades into Saint Pierre's until finally he gained enough power to take over the post and make Murneaux subject to his dictatorship. Fenner robbed the Indians, but they had refrained from violence because they loved the factor and his daughter and the kindly Jesuit father. Murneaux held them off at Fenner's command. Finally, when the Indians moved away from the post, Fenner became more cruel.

Murneaux was sentenced to the whipping post and he and Père Charles were driven into the wilderness. Antoinette was held prisoner at the stockade. Jean Murneaux and Père Charles had started to Fort Benton to try to get help from the soldiers but the old factor had succumbed to his wounds. Père Charles had gone on alone. . . .

A burning tirade of fresh emotion swept over Greg at this new indictment against Fenner. He rose up, his huge fists clenched hard.

"Beavertail," he spoke grimly. "You'll have to go on to Jim Bridger alone. I'm taking Père Charles back to Eagle Feath-

er's village. Then I'm goin' to Saint Pierre's—alone!"

"Yuh can't do that, son," began the old man. "You wouldn't have a chance. Fenner'll tear you to pieces if he sees you again."

"I have to go," he said quietly. "You go to Jim Bridger. Tell him what's happened an' bring the trappers to the post as soon as you get enough to put up a good fight. I'll probably get there before you do, but I'll figure out somethin'."

Beavertail argued and pleaded but Greg was firm. A few minutes later they parted there, Beavertail to go to Jim Bridger with the news of this latest development, and Greg, supporting old Father Charles, in the direction of the Crow village which he had left that morning.

IT WAS the following day when Greg stood on a hill back of Saint Pierre's and looked down on the log stockade. With the exception of the armed sentry at the gate, there were no signs of life around the post.

Stealthily he made his way down the hill and secluded himself in a thicket of lodgepole pines behind the log stockade. After a while men started coming out of the wide gate. Some were armed with long rifles and they swung toward the river and put out into the current in *bateaux* and canoes. Greg reflected grimly that these men were off for another day of raiding, pillaging, perhaps killing.

The sun was falling below the hills and Greg was planning to make his way through the cordon of guards when something caught his eye at the window of the two-story blockhouse just behind the post headquarters. A dim figure moved closer to the window and looked out over the heavy barricade. Even from where he was, it seemed to Greg that he could see a look of hopelessness in the captive's face as she gazed out at the dying sun. And though the distance was too great for any kind of recognition, Greg knew that it was Antoinette Murneaux.

Quickly he scanned all sides of the fort to be sure that nobody else could be watching. Then he stepped from his hiding place. He stood there for a moment before he gave a low whistle and waved the long rifle back and forth. The girl turned her head in his direction and suddenly she waved back at him. She had seen him. Once more he swung the rifle back and forth and then stepped again into the underbrush.

If Greg could have been in the blockhouse at that instant he would have seen the look of hopelessness vanish from Antoinette's eyes and a new light come into her face. She knew without recognizing him who the lone buckskin figure was.

It seemed an interminable time to Greg before complete darkness settled around Saint Pierre's. Capture, he knew, meant certain death, and he realized that he owed it to Antoinette to be cautious—much more so than if he had only himself to think of and to fight for.

When the last light of day had vanished Greg stole softly from his hiding place. He catfooted out a few steps and then stopped to be sure that nobody had heard or seen his movement. Satisfied, he moved on a few steps and repeated the procedure. After several minutes he reached the front of the stockade. There he could see the sentry pacing up and down in front of the gate. Greg lay flat in the grass and remained motionless for long moments. From all appearances everybody else was in the large building in the middle of the compound.

Greg waited until the sentry was walking away from him, then wormed his way a few feet toward the gate. When the guard started back toward him Greg dropped down again. He repeated his movements every time the man moved away until he was almost beside the stockade.

Now Greg lay prone in the tall grass while he watched the renegade reverse his stride and start toward him once more. He stopped breathing, lest the slightest noise betray his position.. The guard came nearer until Greg could almost reach out and touch the buckskinned leg. Then abruptly he turned away. Here was Greg's chance.

Like a lightning bolt he was up, his Green River knife clutched in his hand. He flashed the blade to the small of the renegade's back.

"Don't make a sound," Greg whispered.

THE frightened sentry stood frozen. Wisely for him, he made no attempt to move or cry out. Suddenly Greg, without warning, grasped his powder horn and brought it down on the renegade's skull with a dull resounding thud. The guard crumpled to the ground.

Greg galvanized into action. He darted up to the gate, peered inside for a moment, and then slipped through. The post was the same as it had been when he first saw it a few nights before. Wild sounds of carousal issued from the central building but outside of that all was still.

Keeping in the shadows, he edged around the sides of the log buildings. He moved on a few feet, then stopped and listened intently. When he was sure that all was safe he went on. Presently he gained a point directly across the compound from the blockhouse.

He paused a moment and looked out over the enclosure. The stairway on the outside led to the second floor of the log garrison. He was certain that the noise from the central building would drown out any sound that he might make. He streaked across the compound and made his way quietly up the stairs. At the top he pressed close to the door of the blockhouse and tapped gently. He heard a movement from within.

"Toni!" he whispered.

He heard her voice come back softly. "The door's bolted from the outside. You can open it from where you are."

He looked down and saw that a heavy piece of board plank was thrust under two pieces of strap iron bolted on the door and secured on the jamb. Fenner had not seen fit to lock it as it couldn't be opened from the inside; none of the renegades would dare to try and release the prisoner.

Quickly Greg pulled the plank from its groove and placed it on the stair landing. He swung the big panel back on its hinges and bolted into the room.

He hesitated as his eyes came to rest on Antoinette Murneaux. He thought in that fleeting moment that she was more beautiful than he had ever seen her before in his life. An expression of gratitude and joy was on her face as she saw the gaunt young trapper standing before her. Her black eyes sparkled with excitement. She rushed towards him.

"Toni!" Greg breathed.

"Greg Carson," cried Antoinette. "I knew it was you." She fell into his strong arms.

For a long, blissful moment Greg forgot that anyone or anything else existed. He drew Toni to him. Her soft lips found his and clung.

"I've never told you before," he said, "but I love you, Toni."

"Don't leave me," breathed Toni softly. "I'll stay with you, always, Greg."

Then suddenly Greg disengaged himself from her embrace. "Quick," he snapped. "They didn't hear me come in, but that fool guard'll be comin' around pretty soon an' then it'll be hell to pay."

He took her by the hand and they slipped out into the darkness. Quietly they started to descend the stairs. Then abruptly Greg stopped still and listened. The soft pad of moccasined feet was coming toward them.

They drew back and waited. A huge figure thrust itself around the corner and

stood silhouetted in the light from the post headquarters.

"It's Fenner!" Toni gasped.

CHAPTER FOUR

Trappers' Fighting Champion

HASTILY they got back into the room of the blockhouse and shut the door. Softly, footsteps sounded on the first step and then started their ascent. Greg moved over to a position behind the door and stood there poised. They heard Fenner stop just outside and mouth a heavy curse as he noticed that the door was unbolted. He threw back the panel and stood framed arrogantly in the open portal.

"Unlocked, eh?" he sneered at the girl. "Who did it?"

Very slowly the door swung shut. As Fenner turned he dropped back a step. There standing in front of him, legs spread apart, was the tall, buckskinned form of Greg Carson.

"I did," said Greg quietly.

His cold gray eyes were centered on those of the huge renegade. Fenner gave no sign of shock or surprise as he returned the level gaze of the big trapper.

Greg spoke, his words hard and brittle. "This is showdown, Fenner," he said. "Don't try to get away or call any of your men, 'cause it won't do you any good. This is between you an' me, to the finish. Knives or fists, whichever you like."

Whatever else could be said of Trent Fenner, he was no coward when it came to a battle in which physical prowess was required. He was fully as big as Greg and probably as strong. There wasn't a man in the post who could best him in a knife duel. Now he grinned at the prospect of a fight with his own weapons.

"Knives it is, trapper man," he snarled. "To the finish!"

Greg peeled off his heavy buckskin shirt, revealing his big slab-muscled chest. Fenner followed suit, so as to rid himself of anything that might impede his knife work. Then the two men stood crouched, glaring at each other. Suddenly, as if by some unseen signal, both hands went to their belts and came up brandishing the sharp hunting knives.

They backed away slightly and started slowly circling each other. Each pair of eyes was watching the other for the slightest movement that would catch his adversary off guard.

Toni stood by, terrified at the grim duel which she knew might end in death for Greg.

Now Fenner made a lunge and Greg met it solidly, the blades ringing loudly as they clashed together. Fenner drew back and made a swipe at Greg's side. He ducked the thrust but the keen blade ripped him in the shoulder and blood started streaming from the open wound.

With that burning knife thrust Greg's hatred of Fenner flamed up higher. It brought back memory of that whipping post. He lunged at the factor of Saint Pierre's and he gave ground. Now Fenner came back with another charge. This time he missed and as he made the savage swipe he left a spot wide open on his chest. Greg leaped at the opening, arcing his blade down at the renegade. There was a sound as Greg's knife imbedded itself in flesh and sunk to the hilt. Fenner staggered, and as Greg pulled back the blood-stained blade Fenner slumped to the floor. He rolled over once and lay still.

Greg dropped his knife into its sheath as Toni rushed toward him. A stream of blood ran down and dyed her dress-front crimson. She drew back, horrified.

"You're hurt," she cried.

"Not bad," said Greg. "Come on. We got to get out."

Before he had finished a loud shout rose from the center of the compound. He heard men running. His heart sank.

"Now we *are* in for it," he said grimly.

He peered out of the door, but nobody

had yet reached the back of the blockhouse. Greg knew that their only chance was to try and make a run for the gate. It was a desperate one but they would soon be discovered and trapped in the blockhouse.

His wounded shoulder throbbed mercilessly but he paid no heed. Taking Toni by the hand he eased out on the stair landing and started to descend. At the bottom they threw themselves against the dark side of the building. The interior of the post was now a bedlam. Men were running and shouting frenziedly. Burning pitch torches threw a weird glow on the sides of the stockade. The renegades were scattering more thoroughly through the grounds. Suddenly Greg realized that every avenue of escape was cut off.

Somebody was running directly toward him. He steeled himself and again his huge hand splayed over the hilt of his Green River knife. That blade had tasted blood once that evening; it would soon again. Grimly he gave thanks for one thing. If he went out now he knew that the menace of Trent Fenner was removed forever from the Yellowstone country.

THE renegade came closer, then suddenly darted around the corner of the building. Greg sprang at the shadowy form, his knife leaping from his belt, and the blade struck out at the man's throat. Clawing at his severed jugular vein, he went down.

Greg peered around the corner and scanned the compound in the direction of the gate. Momentarily it was clear. All of the renegades had moved to the other side.

"We've got to make a dash for it," he cried hoarsely to Toni. "You can get through, anyway. I'll fight 'em off if they spot us."

"If there's any fighting to be done," Toni replied quickly, "we'll be doing it side by side."

Greg's gaze found hers momentarily and he read the courage and truth in her sparkling black eyes. There was understanding in his faint smile as they edged around the building.

Suddenly Greg caught his breath, holding Toni still. Piercing the noise of the compound came a loud, bloodcurdling yell echoing back and forth between the stockade walls. And Greg breathed a silent prayer of thanks. "The trappers," he said huskily. But he could not have been prepared for the sight that greeted his eyes.

He stood immobile as if fixed by some giant hand, his jaw dropping in amazement. Half-naked, painted shadowy forms were pouring in through the stockade gate. Arrows whizzed through the air and the staccato sound of rifle fire rang out in the night. Fifty or sixty Indian warriors pushed inside the compound.

"Not the trappers," breathed Greg. "It's —Eagle Feather an' his Crow warriors!"

As the red wave descended on the fort, bedlam broke loose. The renegades answered the first onslaught with a volley of gunfire. The Indians scattered, tomahawking as they fought their way inside.

Greg grabbed up the rifle from a fallen renegade, rammed home a charge of powder and lifted the gun to his shoulder. He leveled the sights on a running form and pulled the trigger. The man bolted and fell forward on his face. In the excitement Greg did not see Antoinette lift a pistol from the dead renegade's side.

Now most of the renegades had garrisoned themselves in the big log building in the center of the compound. Orange streaks of fire jetted from the loopholes. Lithe, crouching forms of Crow braves circled the building as they pumped lead and arrows into the stronghold. But the outlaw bullets were taking their toll. One by one the warriors died as they intercepted whining slugs. Their ranks were thinning miserably, and the renegade fire was becoming hotter.

Suddenly a sharp cry broke from Antoinette. Greg wheeled and saw a rifle leveled on him at not more than twenty paces. The man couldn't miss, and Greg had no time to dodge. A gun roared behind him and almost at the same instant the renegade rifle spat flame. Greg felt a searing pain in his skull and he felt himself falling. But as he did so he saw the man in front pitch forward. As in a dream, Greg saw the girl move to his side, a smoking pistol in her hand.

Then a wild whoop rose from the wilderness outside the stockade. Before its echoes died away it came again. And had Greg not recognized through his swimming vision the two buckskinned figures that thrust themselves into the gate, he would have known by the savage yells that they were old Beavertail and Jim Bridger. Dimly he saw them push on into the compound and he saw others following as they swarmed through the log stockade. Then oblivion swept over him. . . .

WHEN Greg fought his way back to consciousness he was inside the post headquarters building. The room was lighted by oil lamps swung from the rafters and a fire roared in the big-bellied stove. A babel of voices coursed through the building, and above all the noise he could hear Beavertail's cackle and Jim Bridger's low grumble.

His vision cleared and his eyes came to rest on Antoinette Murneaux. She was sitting at his side and smiling. "Feel better?" she asked softly.

"I guess so," replied Greg weakly. "Is it all over?"

"Yes," she told him. "Saint Pierre's is ours again."

Now old Beavertail Maxon turned and saw that Toni was talking to Greg. "Tarnation, son!" he shouted as he hobbled to their side. "You missed out on all the fun. You should of seen them devils scatter when I got after 'em with my old smokepole. I tell yuh, I was goin' around liftin' h'ar like a crazy Comanche Injun. An'—"

"Huh," growled Jim Bridger sourly. "If I hadn't tomahawked that big Canuck just in time yuh'd be goin' around without yore own h'ar! Beavertail Maxon, yo're the confoundedest liar in this whole durn territory!"

The trappers had now gathered around the low bench where Greg was lying. Jim Bridger and Beavertail forgot their own personal feud for a moment and Bridger acted as spokesman for the trappers.

"Younker," he said slowly, "while you was wool-gatherin' we all held council. An' we all agreed unanimously that we needed a factor for Saint Pierre's an' that you didn't have nothin' to say about it. You was goin' to be it, whether you wanted to or not!"

Greg regarded them a moment before he spoke. "I appreciate your feelings, boys," he said finally. "But did you ever stop to figger that maybe the Continental Trading Company would have something to say about that."

"I stopped to figure," broke in Antoinette. "And I figured that when the next boat went down the river to Saint Louis I'd send a letter to Mr. Morgan. He's head of the company, and I always was a great favorite of his." She paused and then went on. "When he learns that it was Greg Carson who saved Saint Pierre's post, he'll never rest until Greg's factor."

She was smiling now, and Greg was wondering how long it would take to get Père Charles back from the Crow village. He was happy. There was peace once more on the Yellowstone and in his vision he could see a great new empire growing out of the wilderness, an empire in which he and Antoinette would always be together. . . .

THE END

GOLD WON'T BUY

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DUSTY DIXON backed the saloon wall as the sheriff's voice rumbled forth: "At last I spot you two gents!" The officer's glance included Enoch Rider, Dusty's pal. "You're that pair that was pardoned from prison a couple of months back. I got a picture-book mind, and all I got to do is keep turnin' the pages. Yep, old Enoch Rider, hired gunie in the Hill County war, an' one-time member of the Harmon Gang. Well-known as a bad actor!" His laugh boomed in satisfaction. For a moment he forgot the younger man backing the wall.

Enoch Rider's eyes, dragged deep in his head by seven years behind iron bars,

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Enoch Rider's eyes, dragged deep in his head by seven years behind iron bars, were unreadable. "I guess you've called our hand, Sheriff," he said calmly.

It was clear that the sheriff believed Rider was done for. But Dusty Dixon, waiting for a sign from his partner, knew differently. The one year the kid had served behind bars had not bitten too deeply, and he laid this to the fact that Rider had singled him out on his arrival at the prison, and had warned him against letting bitterness eat away his heart.

After the prison fire, where they had fought for the lives of the other inmates, Enoch had been more glad on Dusty's account that the governor had granted them pardons.

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"You never was cut out for prison, kid," the old timer had said. "I knew it the day you walked in. You're not owlhoot timber—and I know!"

Now Dusty's eyes narrowed as he saw Rider's shoulders slowly hunching, saw him take a furtive shuffling step toward the door.

The thought burned hotter in him that those seven years had tapped the strength of the old gunman.

"You two jailbirds fade outa this county," boomed the sheriff. "Don't do no more talkin' about gettin' honest jobs on a cow ranch. I reckon you was figurin' on chasin' stuff across the line to your friends."

Dusty Dixon shifted to a forward balance, and his eyes blue-gray as a clump of sage, met the sheriff's.

"We're ex-convicts, all right," he said, "but we're not leavin' town at your biddin' or any other man's. If you want to put us out, start the music."

The tense, crouching posture of the youngster was an open volume to a room of men versed in gun-savvy. The instinct of the gunman was there; it lay in the still glance that hung dead center to the sheriff's nose; it rose from the core of the smooth muscles. It was there, independent of will or thought, like a ghost hovering in thin air.

"Come out of that gun crouch!" ordered the sheriff, keeping his own hands safely in front. "Wanta go back to jail?"

Then Dusty was stepping with old Enoch toward the door.

"If you ever change your mind and want to try runnin' me out, I won't be hard to find," he said as he left. "Before you start hunting me, though, you better turn that horseshoe the proper way above your door. With the open end turned down, your luck might leak out on you."

Enoch Rider's sunken eyes were on the sheriff's gun hand until the kid was through the door.

HUNKERED down, drinking their noon coffee, Enoch Rider spoke: "No use me hittin' any more ranches for a job, kid; I'm too well known. But it's different with you; nobody'd ever spot you for an ex-con if you was travelin' alone. No use clampin' your lips that way, them's true facts. The time has come for you to hook on with a ranch and for me to amble nearer the border, where my talents are appreciated."

Dusty looked straight at his friend. "You don't have to go back to the old trails for a job, Enoch. There are ranches that will hire us both. We've just hit tough sleddin'."

Rider shook his head. "It's time we split, kid."

"We left the rock house together, and we're stickin' together now!"

"We got to have money."

"And we'll get it. Take that saloon in Taggert—run by a crooked sheriff. Every dime in the cash drawer is crooked. We could ride back there and lift a hundred or so. It would last us till we get a job."

Enoch held up a hand. "That's the way I started, stealin' dirty money. But the law don't recognize no difference between it and clean dinero. You'd find yourself on the owlhoot, and that's one trail you was never cut out for, kid. You couldn't sell your own gun to the highest bidder like you'd have to, once you was headed down that rocky path. Nope, it won't work. It's time for us—"

"We're stickin' together, Enoch," Dusty interrupted.

Worry flashed to the sunken eyes of the old outlaw. "The trail forks a ways up the line, Dusty. One branch ambles off to cow-country, and one leads to the roughest section ever left outa hell. I thought at that point—"

"I'm goin' where you go," the youngster said. "If you don't want to try any more ranches, we'll head for the brakes."

Pride flickered over the face of Enoch Rider, pride such as a father might feel for a son, but the network of lines about his eyes tightened.

Already the kid was moving for the horses, showing the issue was closed. . . .

During the afternoon they rode silently, Dusty making no effort to disturb his thoughtful companion. At sundown, they came to the fork in the trail. Cow-country lay to the left, the badlands of Smoke River stretched ahead. Dusty left the selection of their course to Enoch Rider, and wordlessly he accepted the responsibility.

Without breaking their sweeping trot, he swung into the trail dwindling back to broken miles. A tightening of the lips was the only change in Dusty Dixon as he pushed up alongside.

"We'll hit Nine Graves tonight," Enoch said without looking up. "It's a tough spot—not that you're afraid of hell or high water, but a warnin' about Nine Graves ain't never amiss. Remember she's tough."

"I'll remember."

Rider glanced to him pridefully. "Till back yonder in that saloon I didn't realize what a dangerous cub you was, kid, or how close to the edge of hell you was skatin'. You're cut out to be honest, but a crooked sheriff could make you into one of the toughest gents this country ever saw. You must have come of fightin' stock, Dusty—tall fightin' stock."

"I learned to shoot straight before I could talk straight. I figure that year in the stony lonesome whittled down my speed, but another week and I'll be prime."

Enoch smiled, both pleased and worried. He risked a question. "Was your dad a gunman, and your grandad, and your greatgranddad?"

Dusty's fingers tightened on the reins. "I was trained to shoot same as some kids are trained to play the piano. My dad was a lawman." His voice tightened. "Not one like that poisoned chunk of dogmeat we left in Taggert, but a real man. He trained me for his boots, but I got sidetracked along the trail."

DURING the year at prison the kid had not mentioned his home. He had been sent up for being caught with three men who had just robbed a bank. He went up for five years, giving his name as Smith. Enoch now understood why the lad's lips had been sealed.

Enoch wondered why, when the kid had told him his real name, he had not thought of old Blue-Smoke Dixon, Montana sheriff. No wonder the boy was swifter than a bat out of hell when he reached for his cutter.

"My dad's dead," Dusty said quietly. "There ain't no Dixon to carry on the fight."

"You're a Dixon, lad."

"My time in prison stops me from ever liftin' that law-badge off its nail."

In silence they dropped down a darkening hillside to a thick nest of shadows that sparkled with yellow lamplight. Nine graves were scattered at the head of the one street.

As they rode past, Enoch spoke: "There's the restin' place of them that took part in a pitched battle ten years ago this spring. The law tried to elbow in. Nine Graves is a tough place to die, Dusty, but a tougher place to live. Keep your trigger finger set, and your back to the wall."

"I'll keep my weather eyes open, Enoch. Don't worry about them spottin' me as law timber. I'm a long way from home."

"Tain't so far from Montany down to New Mexico, kid."

Dusty's breath sharpened. "You've known me all along?"

"Nope, but when you connected the law with the name of Dixon, then I recollected old Blue-Smoke. Him and me

took a long ride once, only I was ridin' in the lead and bustin' a tug to stay there. Them that was decent along the owlhoot thought well of your dad, kid."

They dismounted before a saloon. As they moved toward the lunch counter connected with the building, Dusty extended his hand to Enoch Rider.

"Here's to stickin' together till hell freezes over."

Enoch coughed to cover a flexing of nerves. He took the hand in a firm grasp. "Here's luck, Dusty—luck and a straight trail!"

They were spotted the instant they entered the room.

"We'll take a corner table and let them come to us," Enoch said, leading the way. "That gent that left by the side door was Larky Munroe," he continued as they slid to chairs. "He's probably gone to bring the boss, Bingham Wells. Nine Graves is touchy about guests ridin' up without bein' announced. Yep, there he comes with Wells. Seven years has changed Bingham considerable. I reckon that's his gunie flankin' him." He stopped speaking as a large, cold-eyed man walked toward their table.

"Howdy, Rider," he said as though Enoch had only been away over night.

"Howdy, Wells. When will Sam Harmon be in town?"

Wells flicked a glance to Dusty. Enoch nodded, and the man continued. "Sam ain't in Smoky Hills no more, but I'm expectin' him to ride in durin' the night. He's across the mountains now, and he's makin' a quick trip to Nine Graves to pick up a couple of good men who know cows—and guns." He laughed. "Sam has took up ranchin' since you been gone."

After Bingham Wells had broken the ice, men drifted up to speak with Enoch Rider. A few shook hands. They all slid measuring glances over Dusty Dixon.

After another hour, Wells came back. "Sam Harmon is waitin' for you in the back room. Straight to the rear there."

Enoch turned to Dusty. "There's sleepin' rooms above this lunch counter. How about you takin' the left corner back and gettin' some shut-eye. I'll be along pronto."

"I could stand a few winks, Enoch. Did Wells say this fellow Harmon needed two men?"

"Yeah, but it's best for me to see him first alone. I'll be along soon, kid."

Dusty climbed the stairs and let himself into a small room with one window. He lay down on the bed fully clothed and stared into the blackness. Enoch had been tense over this meeting with Sam Harmon. Was there danger connected with it? He would liked to have remained at hand in case of trouble, but he couldn't say this to the grim-eyed old outlaw.

He recalled what he knew of Enoch Rider as he lay waiting for him to come. A cool, cautious gun-hand; not as deadly swift as some, but doubly dangerous because of his cold exactness.

In spite of himself he slept. When he awakened, he went to the one window and saw a low line of gray in the east. Slowly the light from the stars was nullified and a new day crept over Nine Graves.

Presently there was enough light for him to see the paper thrust beneath his door. With clumsy fingers he unfolded it and read:

> Dusty, i'm hittin my own trail. I'm in the fast money again so am leavin you this two hundred to get settled on a ranch with. Sam Harmon wont take you, so i'm hookin up alone.
>
> Enoch.

Dusty Dixon read and re-read the penciled letter. He folded the money and fitted it into his vest pocket, then his lips tipped in a smile.

"He ain't in the fast money. This dough is his advance on some job. He's sold out to Harmon for money to keep me off the owlhoot."

He reached for his hat, fitted it down

tightly. "Let me see, Wells said Sam Harmon wasn't working Smoky Hills no more—that he was operatin' across the mountains in the cattle country."

CHAPTER TWO

No Guns for Hire

DUSTY DIXON flagged down the Cactus Springs stage as it rolled to the bottom of Rattlesnake grade. He shifted the heavy saddle he carried on his back, and shoved his hat back from his sweat-streaked brow.

"Howdy, gents!" he greeted as the screech of brakes died.

A smile burst through the alkali caked on the driver's face. "Ain't by any chance lookin' for a lift are you cowboy?" and he nudged his companion sitting beside him on the high seat.

Dusty grinned despite his blistered heels. "I might ride your hack to the next town. My horse stepped in a badger hole and busted a leg, I hoofed it from the high ridge to the east."

"Git in, puncher," called the driver and straightened out his lines.

Dusty stepped up and jerked open the stage door. Then *plunk* went the saddle to the sand and off fanned the big gray hat. "Sorry ma'am, the driver didn't mention a passenger."

The girl inside the stage flushed. "Please don't mind; I guess my nerves are jumpy." Her large brown eyes were pools of alarm as she stared at his holstered gun. He could see her heart thumping under her crumpled travel dress.

Dusty stepped inside and closed the door. "I hate to stop you this way, but I'm in a hurry to get to Cactus Springs."

"It's quite alright, sir," said a small man sitting in the seat beside the girl. "Quite alright."

The little fellow was alert as a cricket but there was an undercurrent of uneasiness about him. Dusty saw that he was gunned and booted, and wearing both very awkwardly.

When the stage swayed on its way the girl turned her face from the stranger and gazed steadily through the isinglass window. Her hands were still clenched, and once as Dusty drew a quick breath, her entire body tensed. The man started also, and his fingers crept to his new gun.

Cautiously Dusty watched a brown curl whip across the girl's cheek, and he decided she was very beautiful. He wished he could hear her voice again, but she gave him no opportunity to speak. Her gaze, remote and impersonal, held to the sage ribboning by the side of the road.

As they traveled a wooded stretch at the bottom of Rattlesnake Canyon, the stage wheels suddenly heaved them free of the road. The Concord settled back with a jolt that strained iron and timber, brakes screeching wildly as the four horses were set on their haunches.

The little fellow flipped off his seat against Dusty's knees, and the girl swayed into him with a low cry of alarm. The door of the stage was jerked open and a gun, backed by a man leaning partly to view, loomed in the aperature.

"Lucas Morgan, hit the dirt!"

The eyes of the little fellow rolled up. He must have seen death in the bore of that gun, for his breath was only a gasp.

"Out!" rasped the voice, " 'Fore I drill you where you set!"

The little fellow dug his frame into the seat back as though to drive through to shelter. The girl swerved to protect him with her own body, but he forestalled the move by an outflung arm.

He turned to the man in the door with shaky courage. "I'm not Morgan. Smith's my name, I—"

The man laughed. "Fall outa that rattletrap."

The girl turned her fear-darkened eyes to Dusty Dixon. They pleaded with him to help, to do something to save the man beside her.

The little fellow was gathering his courage; slowly his untrained fingers were slipping toward the new gun. Then Dusty Dixon exploded to action like so many pounds of dynamite.

His left hand swept the girl to the bottom of the stage and the gun in his right spit flame. He collided with the man in the door and under cover of his staggered frame, poured a shot at the outlaw holding a gun on the driver. Lead hummed past him, back toward the girl. The thought of her in line with those bullets, was like fire in his blood.

Both the puncher's hands now held bucking guns, and the crash of the battle shook Rattlesnake Canyon. The roar smashed against the rimrock-crowned walls and shuddered through the gorge. The first outlaw was down now, but the man on horseback was still fighting. The duel burned for another second, then the horseman, wounded and hanging to leather, pivoted his horse and raced off.

THE hammering of gun-echoes at the faraway rims grew fainter. The little fellow came leaping from the stage, sweat-drenched and grim-lipped.

"Are they gone?" he asked in an awed whisper. "Lord! What a fight!"

The girl came shakily to Dusty's side. "That was a brave thing you did."

"Just kinda followin' the laws of self-preservation, ma'am. When another gent sticks a gun under your nose, you mostly got to do somethin'."

She held out her hand. "You knew they were not after you. I want to thank you for saving my brother's life."

"I want to add a few words there myself," the little fellow seconded, and thrust out his hand.

So the girl was his sister! Dusty wondered what had brought them into surroundings so unfamiliar to them. The driver and the passenger who had been with him on the outer seat, came up from examining the dead man.

"Howdy, Morgan," the driver said to Dusty. "You had me fooled plumb. I was tipped off you might be ridin' the rattler soon, and when I heard that gent order you out, I figured he was talkin' to the little feller. By cracky, I'm pleased to shake your hand!"

The passenger took a chew from his hip plug and offered it around. "Seein' you was from Chicago," he said to Dusty, "folks got the idea you was a greener. Them long-loopers from across the border figured your scalp would be easy to lift, but I reckon there's a pair of them a heap wiser by now. Sam Harmon will sure be surprised to hear Lucas Morgan jumped into a fight with hell-spittin' guns."

The little fellow sucked in his breath and took a step forward, but Dusty gave him a silencing glance.

"Who is Sam Harmon?" he asked.

"Sam? He owns the ranch sidin' yours on the west. He's been tryin' to keep Gray Bluffs afloat till you got here or sold out."

"A neighbor, huh?"

"Yeah, and losin' cows same as Gray Bluffs, only not so many, and they ain't started to kill off his punchers like they have yours. Even them border thieves go slow with Sam Harmon."

The passenger turned to answer a call from the driver to help cut loose the dead horse and rig up a spike lead. The little fellow pushed close to Dusty and spoke in low tone.

"You better tell those fellows you're not Lucas Morgan or your life won't be worth a plugged nickel in Cactus Springs. This incident just past proves they are out for blood. It'd a been the last of me if you hadn't stepped in."

The girl shuddered. "They would have killed Luke."

"Sure they would," the little fellow said flatly. "And I hope, Kate, this will show you the wisdom of my suggestion that you return home."

She linked her arm in his. "It only proves I was right to come. I'll learn to shoot—we'll both learn. Either we both stay, or we both go back." Her voice sank. "Let's go back before you're hurt, Luke."

"Not any! Those cutthroats aren't going to scare me off. Now that I have had my baptism of fire, I'll make a better showing next time."

He looked at Dusty. "My name is Lucas Morgan, and this is my sister Kate."

"Dixon is my name—Dusty Dixon."

"It's sure been a happy meeting, Dixon. I'd appreciate it if you'd call us Smith, in Cactus Springs. I'd like to find out a few things about this ranch my uncle left me before the town discovers I'm Morgan."

Dusty nodded, but his mind was busy on what the driver had told him. Sam Harmon owned a ranch next to the Morgans, was trying to keep this neighboring ranch afloat for its eastern owner. There were punchers being killed and cattle rustled. Slowly the picture began to take shape. . . .

WHEN they were again seated inside the coach, Lucas Morgan spoke. "From the questions you asked the driver, Dixon, I take it you're a stranger."

"Stranger complete."

"Are you wanting work, by any chance?"

"Been wearin' down good horseflesh lookin' for work."

Lucas Morgan leaned forward excitedly. "Would danger shy you off? I mean real danger?"

Dusty smiled. "I ain't much of an authority on danger. It seems to me that lightnin' can hit you home in bed same as out in the open. What's the job?"

"Fighting for Gray Bluffs—this ranch my uncle left me."

Dusty's lips tightened. "I don't hire my guns to no man, Morgan. I don't fight accordin' to wages or some man's biddin', I fight accordin' to the dictates of my conscience."

"I'm willing to let your conscience guide you, Dixon. You can name the wages after you get my idea. This ranch, Gray Bluffs, was left me by an uncle I hardly knew existed. I have been warned not to try and take possession. This man Sam Harmon has written offering to buy the place—for a song. He advised against my trying to hold on. He says this country is no place for a tenderfoot. In fact, I resented the tone of his letter, and I also resented the price he offered."

The little fellow leaned closer and his voice sank to a whisper. "Here is the job. I want you to step off the stage at Cactus Springs as Luke Morgan, owner of Gray Bluffs!"

The words streaked a cold path through Dusty's mind. The little fellow was offering him a real job, offering him a free hand in the coming fight. He could take charge, run Gray Bluffs like his own ranch!

Morgan was still speaking. He was saying there was money in the bank to hire more fighters if they needed them—plenty of money to carry on.

Hire more fighters! A place for Enoch Rider! What a hand the old gunie would make pitted against those border thieves! Together he and Enoch would save Gray Bluffs for Lucas Morgan and his sister.

He nodded slowly. "I'll take the job."

Young Morgan gripped his hand. That's a real relief! Say something Kate," he cried at the girl sitting like stone. "We've just hired the best man in the West."

Dusty looked into her strained face and

smiled. She answered with tears brimming into her brown eyes.

"It's so dangerous," she whispered. "It might—it could mean your death."

"Thanks for thinkin' about me," he said warmly, "but you just lean back and take things easy. Leave this scrap to Luke and me."

CHAPTER THREE

A Killer Signs On

DUSTY DIXON spoke low to Luke Morgan as they paused outside the Blue Roan Saloon in Cactus Springs. Luke now wore two weathered guns, a pair from Dusty's saddle roll, and once worn by Blue-Smoke Dixon.

"Mind you keep your hands away from that pair of steel aces, Luke. Can't you see that by strappin' them on you're askin' for trouble, instead of shyin' it off?"

"But it stands to reason, Dusty, that a man with two guns is more dangerous than a man with only one gun."

The tall puncher shook his head. "We've been over that complete, and I can't make you see it. Now listen, we may run into trouble in this saloon. Don't talk 'less you're pushed to it, and you won't be, 'cause a man has a right to keep his own counsel. Just look 'em hard in the eyes if you're questioned, and answer mighty short. Remember, your name's Shorty Smith."

The little fellow's breath cut rapidly from his tightly drawn lips. "Maybe you better tell them I'm deaf and dumb."

"You couldn't play that part, besides the stage driver knows. Just tighten up on all talk."

His face suddenly lighted. "And they'll think I'm a real tough article! I don't mind that part, Dusty."

"Morgan," Dusty corrected laconically.

They stepped inside, Shorty Smith trailing with a fair imitation of a swagger. Dusty asked the bartender if Bart Cruthers was waiting.

The man's eyes leaped over Dusty's lithe frame and gun-hung hips. "Yeah, Bart's here. Hey, Bart."

Bart Cruthers came from the corner of the room with a soft-footed tread. His eyes were pale pools of blue, fringed with dead white lashes.

"I take it you're Lucas Morgan," he said to Dusty. "I'm your foreman."

When Dusty grasped the slender hand, he found it laced with sinews. "Yeah, I'm Morgan, and I didn't like the tone of your last letter. I'm not quittin' as you suggested, Cruthers."

They moved to a deserted table and Dusty continued speaking. "I've never been in a place so crammed with the other gent's lead that there wasn't a place for mine. If this fight has you bluffed, say so."

The pale eyes retreated behind the white lashes. "Nothin' this side of hell or beyond has me bluffed, Morgan. I thought you was a grecner, and I wrote that letter thinkin' to save your hide. That Chicago lawyer said—"

"That lawyer never saw me, no more than my uncle that died. I aim to keep Gray Bluffs and operate it."

"Good," Cruthers said dryly.

"You mentioned the ranch was powerful short-handed. How come?"

"Been too many punchers killed on Gray Bluffs lately. Men don't want to sign on with us any more. "It ain't been fun—a knife in one cowboy's back, shots from ambush and bullets singin' through the bunkhouse windows."

"What did you do about it, Cruthers?"

A FLUSH crept to the high cheek bones. "Nothin' a man can do. There's a powerful gang operatin' along the border just below us. They kill a man and lope back into Mexico."

"Nothin' a man can do, huh?" Dusty

echoed slowly. "That's what you done—*nothin'*."

"I called Sheriff Webb. He's killed horseflesh on the job for two months."

"Ain't killed nothin' but horseflesh?"

Anger streaked through the blue line back of the white lashes. "He's a good man, Sheriff Webb, but he's up against a stacked deck. That border gang has put a jinx on Gray Bluffs."

"I don't believe in jinxs, Cruthers. You and me are goin' to open on this gang with some plain and fancy lead slingin'. We'll hire some good men to help. I picked one up on the stage. Meet Shorty Smith."

Bart Cruthers eyed the new boots and untanned hands. "Howdy," he said and a faint sneer traced his lips.

Shorty Smith answered briefly. Yet the worn belt and the satin smoothness of the old .45 handles troubled Cruthers a bit. "Go ahead double, I see," he added.

The little fellow had caught the sneer. "Yeah," he replied shortly. "According to my arithmetic, two guns sling more lead than one."

Dusty Dixon rose and moved to the bar. He waved up the half dozen men in the room, among them two punchers showing the wear of a long trail. He bought drinks and lifted his glass to the memory of the uncle who had so recently willed him a ranch.

He managed to line up beside the punchers. "I was at the barn when you two rode in," he said. "Heard you askin' for a berth on a good spread."

One was tall and crowned with flaming red hair, the other was gray of eye, gray of face, with mouse-colored hair showing below his dust-caked Stetson.

The red-head answered for the pair. "You heard correct. Do you know of such a spread?"

"Gray Bluffs can use you."

The puncher teetered back on his high heels. "Is my hearin' gettin' poor, or did you say Gray Bluffs?"

"Don't Gray Bluffs suit you?"

"Ain't that the ranch that gets itself a man every mornin' before breakfast?"

"It used to. Things has changed."

At once a tension ran over the room. A man leaning on the bar swept a glance to Bart Cruthers, and the white lashes of the foreman flicked an answer.

"What's changed the goin' at Gray Bluffs?" the red-headed puncher asked.

"I have," Dusty Dixon replied, and his blue-gray eyes backed the quiet tones. Smiles that sprung up at the words were short-lived. This stranger who had come to take over Gray Bluffs wasn't old in years, but calculating by inherited knowledge, he was a patriarch.

The red-head scratched his head. "That bein' the case, we might give you a whirl. I'm Red Stone, my pal is Jock Miller."

Miller stirred. "No go, Red. To hell with all that knife-stabbin' in the back!"

"But this gent has changed things like that. Busted as we are—"

"Nope, I'd rather eat my saddle."

Dusty spoke to Jock Miller. "You can always find me at Gray Bluffs. After me and Shorty Smith has put a few of them killers to work pushin' up daisies, you might feel different."

"You mean after the fightin' is over, maybe me and Jock will be lookin' for a soft berth?" Red bristled. "Danged if I ain't goin' to hang my saddle in your bunkhouse just to show you what a hell-bender I am! Huh Jock?"

Dusty shook his hand. "I'll see you get a bed under the part of the roof that don't leak from bullet holes, Red."

Jock groaned and extended his hand.

"Glad to have you two fellows," the substitute owner of Gray Bluffs said. "If you need any rifle shells, take on a load 'fore we pull out."

"How about a couple a suits of armor?" Jock asked sadly.

IT WAS evening of that same afternoon that Dusty and Shorty sat in the Blue Roan. Dusty was speaking. "I tell you to clear out! Get back over to the hotel with your sister, and pronto. This will just be a skirmish tonight, but havin' you around with them two fool guns strapped to your hips makes me nervous as a one-eyed cat. Get out of here while you're able, Luke!"

"Call me Shorty. I'm keeping in part. My face feels paralyzed from holding it so stiff. I guess Cruthers thought I was plenty tough."

Dusty frowned. "I don't like that two-gun idea no better now than at first. See that you don't let nobody corner you on the way back to the hotel."

Dixon's voice dropped as his sage gray eyes fastened on a tall man entering the door. He did not need to be told who it was. This was the man to whom old Enoch had hired out that night in Nine Graves. As Dusty looked over the room, shadowing some ten or a dozen silent men, he knew he stood alone. Sam Harmon had built himself up strongly in the community.

"That's Harmon," Dusty said softly.

Shorty Smith at last caught the hair-trigger tension. "But you seem to be looking for someone else."

"Yes, a friend—one to stand at my back in this fight."

"Holy Smoke! He might walk up and call you by name!"

"Not this gent. He'll size up the picture from cellar to attic before he opens his mouth."

Shorty's eyes glistened. "A tough hombre, huh? Wish he'd get along so I could understudy him a bit."

Sam Harmon and his men strode to the bar, but Enoch Rider was not among them. Dusty's eyes took on new bleakness. He realized that many things could happen if he did not immediately contact the old outlaw. They might even be pitched into a fight against each other.

That Harmon was there for trouble he knew by the whispers he had caught during the afternoon. Sam Harmon was questioning the identity of this fighting man, claiming to be Lucas Morgan, who had sprung into their midst.

Harmon's glance was canvassing the room, his long, thin body charged with animosity. Slowly his eyes moved from face to face.

Shorty slipped forward on the edge of his chair. "Look—there's another two-gunman, the lanky looking gentleman beside Harmon."

"More'n likely a hired killer. Men of Harmon's stamp keep gunies who kill for pay. Harmon's comin' over. Get out!"

"Don't worry about me. I got my poker face screwed down tight."

Dusty Dixon's hands were hugged close to his side, as he arose. The tall man came slowly, his thin features calm.

"My name is Harmon," he said. "Cruthers tells me you're Morgan."

"Yes," Dusty answered. "I'm Morgan. I guess we're neighbors."

Harmon's upper lip curled in a sneer, and his next words knifed the tense silence. "Old man Morgan happened to tell me somethin' about his nephew he left Gray Bluffs to—you're not him!"

Dixon stepped in close, matching him eye to eye. "I expected trouble from you, Harmon, seein' you're set to steal the ranch."

Harmon's gunman eased up, animal swiftness in every inch of his tense frame. He hung a cold glance on Dusty's face as Harmon spoke to the room.

"Gents, this man ain't Morgan! He's got papers and letters sayin' he is, but I figure he's killed Morgan along the way and stole his belongin's. When he flagged the stage in Rattlesnake Canyon, he claimed his horse had fell and busted a leg. More'n likely, Lucas Morgan shot that horse from under him while Mor-

gan was fightin' for his life. Old man Morgan told me enough about his nephew so's I know this ain't him!"

Dusty had no time to answer Harmon's charge. The gunman before him was a master, and to match his swiftness would take concentration and perfect, practiced coordination.

Harmon laughed. "He ain't sayin' nothin' folks!"

Dusty Dixon never swerved a hair. "Come on," he said softly to the gunie. "Harmon has hired you to kill me, but it's goin' to be a tougher job than you planned."

There was a stir from the breathless line along the wall. Dixon felt the move, yet dared not shift. If Sam Harmon had planted a gunie at his back . . .

Shorty Smith moved a step toward that line of bystanders and fell into a crouch that was a fair imitation of Dusty Dixon. Thumbs hooked over his gunbelt, he spoke.

"I'm in this fight, gentlemen—and don't make no mistake about that fact. I'm ordering everyone to stay put in that line. Not another inch forward! If I open up, I'll sweep the room as clean as a boneyard." He barely moved his lips enough for the words to sift through.

Dusty Dixon tightened in every muscle. "Let's get outa here," he said to Shorty. "If these gents care to go on livin', they better not try to stop us."

"No you don't!" Harmon barked. "Want to run, huh? Gettin' scared?"

Dusty worked himself between Shorty and Harmon's gunie as he took a backward step. Slowly they glided for the door. The little fellow moved with great caution, and the last step terminated in a flying leap for safety.

"Stop!" ordered Harmon, as Dusty Dixon had only one step between him and the door. "Stop or we'll drop you in your tracks!"

It would be rich for Sam Harmon to put this gray-eyed menace out of the way. Dusty riveted his glance on the face of the gunie, but the killer still waited, perhaps in hopes that Dusty's iron nerve would break.

Then came the instant when he must act. He weaved to his gun. No hitch—all one movement and smooth as glass.

Dusty Dixon met the play.

It was as cold a death hand as had ever been drawn in Cactus Springs. The grim finish came as one of the pair stiffened and began to fall. Sam Harmon's hired gunie toppled to the floor, his falling weapon adding a hollow clatter to the reverberations. Dusty leaped through the doorway into the night.

CHAPTER FOUR

When Gunmen Fall Out

DUSTY and Shorty paused to listen to the shouting inside the Blue Roan. The voice of Sam Harmon sailed over the stamping and cursing. "Go after that killer! Lynch him! He ain't no more Morgan than me!"

A lone voice protested. "Let's go slow 'til he has a chance to talk."

"He had a chance right here in this room," bellowed Harmon.

"He never had a chance to do nothin' but fight for his life. If he'd dragged his glance off the bridge of Taylor's nose, it'd a been him a layin' there, instead of Tenpenny Taylor!"

"That's right, Harmon," a new voice shouted. "No lynchin' till he's had a chance to talk. You're the only one claimin' he's a imposter."

Dusty hurried Shorty for the alley. "Round up Jock and Red, and harness the team to the buckboard Bart Cruthers already rode in. If we stay around town, Harmon will push another fight on us. And listen to me! Don't you ever pull another deal like you did back yonder in

the saloon. It's a wonder you wasn't blasted clean through the roof."

"I held them tight as a fiddle string, didn't I, Dusty? But that old fellow that unhooked himself from the line and started to work up on your back is sure a long way from his mother's apron strings. I had a feeling I'd met my own funeral. That old gent's eyes were as still as two dead fish, and so deeply sunken I had to bat my lids twice to see them."

Dusty jerked up their rapid pace. "Was he gray and kinda hunched?"

"Yes, but it was the eyes that raised my gooseflesh."

"Go to the hotel and get Miss Kate, Shorty, and find them punchers. I'm goin' back to find that friend I mentioned."

"Back to the saloon? Holy Smoke, won't you need me to protect your rear?"

"Reckon I'll worry along without you."

Dusty raced around the building and approached a window that he thought was in the room Harmon had entered. It was, and there stood Old Enoch, calm as death.

"What hit you back yonder, Rider?" Harmon barked. "You had a chance for a side shot."

"The little runt had me covered."

"Rider, your nerve is tapped out!"

"Now's a good time to settle that thought. Go for your gun if you want to see if them seven years has tapped me."

Harmon cursed and fell back before the steady eyes. Dusty smiled as he watched the calm, seasoned face of old Enoch. Together they would pull Gray Bluff from the clutches of Harmon and his border thieves.

A door leading into the saloon opened and a man entered. At first sight, Dusty thought he had seen the face, but the voice was totally strange. Then he was sent back to sheltering brush by approaching footsteps. When he returned to his station at the window, there'd been a change in the room.

SAM HARMON was pacing like a lion, eyes flashing. He leaned toward Enoch. "A perfect set-up, Rider. So the kid is the one that was pardoned with you? An ex-con! I knew he wasn't Morgan—I'd a bet my neck on it—but havin' cold facts for this play is what counts with Cactus Springs. Maybe he did kill Lucas Morgan!"

"Maybe," old Enoch answered slowly. "He's plenty tough."

The warm blood in Dusty's body leaked away and was replaced with ice water. Enoch was selling him out!

"We got to stop him and stop him sudden," Harmon snarled. "I'll put the sheriff at his throat, but that won't be enough. He's smart. No posse is goin' to run him into a gopher hole—it'll take brains and nerve to get him."

"It'll take more brains than is runnin' loose around here, Harmon."

"There's only one man on the trail that can get that kid's scalp and that's you, Rider. He's swifter than a bat—got too much fire for his own good. He'll wear himself down. You got what it takes to stay on his trail till he goes up in his own smoke?"

Enoch Rider shook his head. "His nerve ain't goin' to weaken. How about puttin' the sheriff on him and runnin' him out of the country?"

"He's too wise. He's already figured I'm after that ranch. Nothin' is safe so long as he's above sod. I'll double your pay for the job."

The deeply sunken eyes burned like twin coals. "Four times the regular amount, Harmon," he said evenly. "An' I'm likely buyin' myself a one-way ticket to hell. I'd rather Ellis had the job."

"Six-hundred goes," Harmon snapped.

Dusty turned away from the window. Harmon was urging Enoch to get down to the stable and see what was doing. If Dusty had left town, Harmon wanted Enoch to get on the trail at once.

Then Harmon's voice boomed over the quiet street to front of the saloon. He was ordering someone to bring the sheriff.

In another few moments Cactus Springs would know he was an ex-con—that his name was not Morgan. And Enoch had done that to him! His blood began to run hot in his veins and his hand settled on his gun.

The big thing was to keep Sam Harmon from suspecting that little Shorty Smith was the man he was after. Shorty's best protection—and that of his sister—lay in having him believe Morgan had been murdered. The law was probably under the thumb of Sam Harmon.

He whipped up his pace as he neared the stable, and when a shadow sprang at him from the corner, he buried the nose of his gun in flesh.

"Holy Smoke—Dusty!"

"Damn it, Shorty, what do you mean bustin' outa the shadows onto a man?"

"I been looking for you with two glass eyes, Dusty. Some tough gentlemen are trying to run Red and Jock out of the country!"

Dusty leaped away.

He came upon the two punchers in a circle of light cast by a lantern they had hung on a peg to help them in harnessing the team. Red's temper was blazing. As Dusty paused, a third man joined the two that had the new Gray Bluffs punchers cornered. This third man was Enoch Rider, and he spoke to Red and Jock.

'Cactus Springs ain't had a double funeral for three days; I'd hate for you gents to break the charm. These fellers here are actin' for your own good—tryin' to lengthen your life. Now get ready to ride! I'll escort you, so's you won't hit the wrong trail. Climb your saddles!"

Dusty seemed to lift from the earth into that circle of flickering lantern light. His glance centered on the face of Enoch Rider, and he gave a sharp order for Red and Jock to watch the other pair.

"Speakin' of funerals," he said, "Sam Harmon better lay in a supply of coffins for his men. Reach for your steel if you feel lucky."

Enoch Rider looked at the kid for a long, hard second. "Feelin' frisky tonight, ain't you?"

"Not frisky—just final. If you got the nerve to go for your gun, you better pray she carries one silver bullet."

A hectic flame disturbed the deep calm in the old outlaw's eyes. "You're fast," he said. "It took a good man to get Tenpenny Tailor, but you done it easy." It was as though he gloried in the swiftness of the arm that was pitted against him. "You might even get me," he finished.

Dusty leaned closer. "And cheat you out of that four-time pay."

Enoch weaved back, or it could have been the work of the flickering shadows. A cry rose in the street.

"Heavy excitement," he said. "Do you reckon someone coulda told Cactus Springs who you really are, kid?"

Dusty's face went a shade grayer. "I'm prayin' you'll make a move for that gun."

Men were now racing toward the stable. There were cries for a posse. Dusty told Shorty to stand a saddled horse out back and wait for him. He spoke to Enoch Rider.

"Get out of here! Join the posse that's formin' to hunt me. I'm lettin' you go now—next time I'll mow you down!"

Enoch Rider nodded for his two friends to see what the trouble was out front. "While I'm rememberin' that, kid," he said softly, "here's something for you to remember: that hot blood in your veins is goin' to lay you in your grave while your years are yet young." He dropped his voice. "You was a fool to try and get away with a ranch! Get outa the country fast. I'll meet you to-night at the head of Buckhorn and we'll talk."

"Get goin'. That posse formin' was built by your hand."

Enoch's shoulders slid to a tired hunch. "Don't wanta talk, huh? Well, kid, Enoch Rider lived 'fore you was born, and he's got a good chance of livin' after you're dead. Look out for Sam Harmon!"

As the commotion burst at the front of the stable, Dusty leaped for the back door. He grasped Shorty with fingers that bit like iron.

"Listen hard, Shorty. I'm an ex-con—Sam Harmon's found it out. I'm hittin' for the hills. Take Kate and stick close to the ranch until you hear from me."

"I'll tell them I'm Morgan, Dusty, then they can't chase you for my murder. Every man for himself in a storm like this!"

Kate Morgan came running through the barn. "Harmon has the town out to lynch you, Dusty! Let's tell the truth and the three of us fight together!"

"Miss Kate, Sam Harmon would get Luke before mornin', and tellin' his real name wouldn't help me any. A killer has already been set on my trail. That crowd is organizin' rapid, so I got to be on my way. Don't worry, they won't catch me—I've had experience with posses!"

If Dusty Dixon could have known that a shadowy form drifted away from the spot where he had that last talk with the little fellow and his sister, he would not have left them alone in Cactus Springs. He would have ridden back into Sam Harmon and Enoch Rider for a face to face fight.

CHAPTER FIVE

Into Death's Doorway

DURING the next day, Dusty Dixon lay back in the hills surrounding Gray Bluffs, his horse hidden in a timbered bottom.

While he waited for nightfall, he slept a bit. Once he dreamed Enoch was talking to him behind the silent, gray walls.

"Don't let the Big Place sap your strength, kid—don't let her warp your reason. She can burn your heart out if you don't ride with a tight rein. Don't let her get you to snarlin' at all you meet; once your faith in humanity is gone, your spirit's busted!"

Dusty awakened with the struggle to speak. He was trying to tell Enoch that he hadn't lost faith. His lips curled as memory returned. He gazed into the alkali bank before him and admitted that his belief in Enoch at that time had saved his soul from shriveling like a frosted leaf. He had not been guilty of crime, yet circumstances had sent him to prison. He remembered then how his dad had builded on him, taken it for granted that he would some day pin on the bullet-dented star. Those were the days when the even voice of old Enoch saved him. The gray-haired outlaw had stood beside him like a rock, gradually driving back the tide of bitterness.

And now that same hand was raised against him—to collect in bloodstained gold for his death!

A WHITE moonlight sprayed the land as Dusty rode cautiously down upon the buildings of Gray Bluffs. He hid his horse in a fringe of cottonwoods edging a small stream and advanced on the house. It was a squatty, square-built affair, reared by hands that had taken little time for line or symmetry. But it was as substantial as the ground upon which it stood.

A light burned in a room Dusty reasoned was the kitchen; everything else was darkness. The barns were silent, the bunkhouse a pitch-black blotch of shadow. Over all the shallow valley was a silence which dug into the marrow.

Dusty moved soundlessly to the single lighted window and looked through the crack left by the blind. The realization that the glass was shattered chilled him; it suggested that a body had been hurled

through. The room was a still picture—at first. Then he saw the new puncher, Red Stone, slumped in a chair, his face stormy, eyes fixed on the floor.

Gazing into the room was like looking upon the ashes of a fire that had recently blazed with destruction. So strongly did Dusty feel the picture, that his hand crept to his gun. Where were the others? Why was Red Stone sitting alone in the battle-scarred silence?

A door from a darkened hall opened, and Kate Morgan entered. Her colorless face and haunted eyes were proof that tragedy was clutching the scene. Her hand flew to her heart as she caught a sound outside the window. Red Stone leaped to his feet, reaching for his gun.

Dusty lifted the blind aside. "It's me. What's wrong here?"

Red Stone croaked sharp words of relief. "Sufferin' blue blazes, feller, you're plumb welcome!" He helped Dusty break away the remaining glass so he might swing in through the window. "Shorty Smith has been kidnaped!"

Dusty straightened as Kate Morgan gripped his arm. "They took Luke away—five masked men! They knew who he was—they heard us talking at the stable in Cactus Springs."

"Jock is trailin' them," Red said. "One of us had to stay with Miss Kate, and I lost the flip."

"So Harmon knows he's Morgan, huh?" Dusty asked. "He got him!"

"It wasn't Harmon," Red snapped, "It was that old gunie roddin' the show, the one that had us speared at the stable last night. I recognized his eyes, even if they was lookin' through a black mask."

Grim lines settled deeper into Dusty's face. "How much start have they got?"

"Half hour maybe—not much more. They rode south."

"A half hour—ridin' south—" He seemed to be thinking aloud. "I figure I can catch them. They're takin' him to Sam Harmon and there won't be no fireworks till they get there."

He looked up sharply at Red Stone. "You say the old gunie that speared you at the stables—yeah, Red, he's old, well past his prime. For fancy gun work, it takes a set of muscles that ain't got crimps in them. With half a break, I'll take him—mow him down like hay. But this is what we got to remember: Age ain't hurt his brain! He's got knowledge stored away that'll win this fight for Sam Harmon if we don't stop him."

He swung back through the window with a curt word of caution to Red Stone. The girl and man left alone in the silent room, listened to the birth of hoofbeats; then listened as they gradually faded. . . .

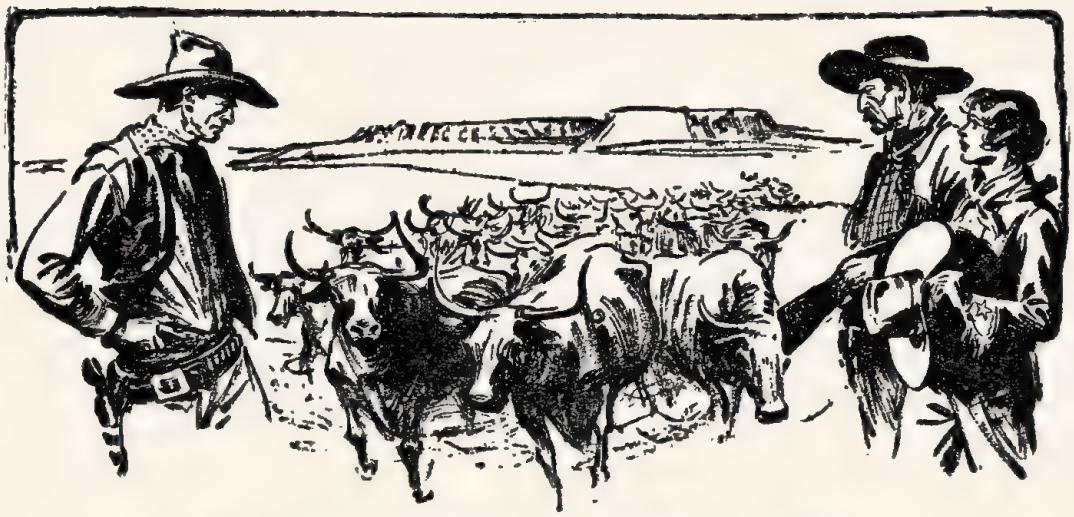
IN THE white moonlight Dusty followed the trail easily. Five fast moving horsemen were bound to leave plain sign. And they were heading south; he would have expected that, for there lay the surest protection. They would slip through Blue-Throat Cut and bury themselves in the broken miles beyond.

Dusty recalled the reasoning of his dad. The Montana sheriff had claimed the edge of the game was with the law if the law was smart enough to know it. "A criminal always heads for shelter," he pointed out. "The darker the crime, the darker the haunt he selects. The more he has at stake, the deeper in he'll ride to cover his tracks. That's gilt-edged reasonin', son. Always remember it."

Dusty remembered it as he followed the trail. Sam Harmon had staked everything on this move. He must do away with Lucas Morgan without the country giving him a single glance of suspicion. He probably had a plan formulated whereby the murder sign would point to the ex-convict, Dusty Dixon.

Dusty found tracks at the mouth of Blue-Throat Cut; some of the earth thrown up was faintly moist. He advanced

(Continued on page 149)



Up The Trail

IF EVER a man had cause to sell his soul to the devil for the price of one moment of red vengeance, Big Steve Fletcher was that man. Starting as a law-abiding cowman down on the Border, he returned to his ranch one tragic day to find that Mexican raiders had made a smoking shambles of the little house; had killed his wife and staked his only son out on an ant-hill.

That moment made Steve Fletcher raise his clenched hand to the sky and swear that he would carry a one-man war of retribution against those who had torn up by the roots everything for which he lived. . . .

So Steve Fletcher took the outlaw trail, carrying his hate across the yellow flood of the Rio Grande. He led as tough a bunch of outcasts as ever ran wet cattle across the line, and gloried in the fact that he—and his son Choppy—could beat them at any game they wanted to play.

But a stranger who called himself Dave Brett joined up with Steve's wild bunch—a man who was inclined to use his head as well as his guns. And one storm-lashed midnight as they returned from a raid, Dave Brett wheeled his horse deliberately into their stolen and madly stampeding herd, and saved from death at the horns of a stampeding longhorn steer Steve's outlaw son.

Later, Steve rode at Brett's side, and heard Brett say bluntly: "You're a damn poor father, Steve. Raisin' your boy to be a snarlin' wolf, just like yourself."

"He's mine ain't he? What's it to you? He's a better man right now than the scum he rides with. He's got a right to hate—and to kill if he wants to."

Dave Brett looked at the cold eyes of Steve Fletcher. Then he leaned over in the saddle and plucked three cartridges from Steve's belt. "All right, Steve. You owe me these for savin' his life. I reckon I just wasted three of mine, when I killed that longhorn."

Steve went white. "Maybe I'm a poor father when I stuck a gun into Choppy's fist and taught him how to use it, after he got well. Maybe I lost him then, but he can go ahead and square a debt for his dead mother that needs to be paid—an' maybe I won't live to square it. . . ."

Brett shrugged. "The old story, Steve—you're invokin' wolf law. The he-wolf leads the pack till he gets old. When he slows his pace they pull him down—and even his whelps are in on that kill. You're first duty's to that boy. By makin' a real man out of him, you're cheatin' the ones who staked him out on that anthill and killed his mother. If he turns wolf, it'll mean either a Mex bullet in his belly or the hangnoose this side of the Border. They'll get the last laugh.

"You talk like a preacher!" Steve Fletcher flared up. "Talk I wouldn't take from any other man on earth. You damn meddler, you keep a close rein on your mouth. . . ."

Brett smiled. "Think it over, Chief," he said softly, and returned the three shells. "Mebbeso that's more than you're willin' to spend on the kid. But I'm takin' cards in the game, mister." And wheeling his horse, he galloped back into the dust-cloud. . . .

Steve Fletcher just then didn't know what this strange renegade recruit meant by that. But he was to find out before many days—days which were jammed with dramatic action, with hard-riding adventure—and bleak bitter tragedy. For the button, brought up as a wolf-cub, had his own life to live, his own destiny to solve.

Just how he did it; and just what happened to Steve Fletcher, boss of the famous Border Outlaws bunch, is told by Harry F. Olmsted, in the feature-length lead novel, *Beyond the Law's Last Outpost*, which will appear in the January issue. Also novelettes and short stories by Cliff Farrell, John G. Pearsol, Stone Cody, Harry Sinclair Drago and other writers of man-sized Western drama. The January issue is published December 3rd!

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LUDEN'S—A Test Will Tell

(Continued from page 147)

with wolfish keenness, his brain working coolly. Caution counted most, for he was outnumbered five to one. A man's life depended on his beating down those odds.

He was riding to kill Enoch Rider. The thought ground through his mind in a circle. That was what he had sworn to do back yonder in the ranch house—to burn down Enoch. If Enoch should gain a shade of advantage, the fight would swing the other to Sam Harmon. It meant the death of Lucas Morgan and the stealing of a big ranch from a helpless girl. Sam Harmon had placed the winning of this fight in the hands of his old gunie; that made everything grind back to the same end. Enoch Rider must go!

When a shot cracked back to him from around the bend ahead, Dusty slid his horse into a thicket of scrub trees and advanced on foot. The canyon walls had flared back a little, admitting some of the white moonlight.

As he came to sight of a narrow valley, he saw a cabin shoved into a clump of trees. An unprotected window showed a square of light, and light also cut from an opened door. As the last echoes of that single shot filtered away, a voice rasped out in victory.

(Continued on page 150)

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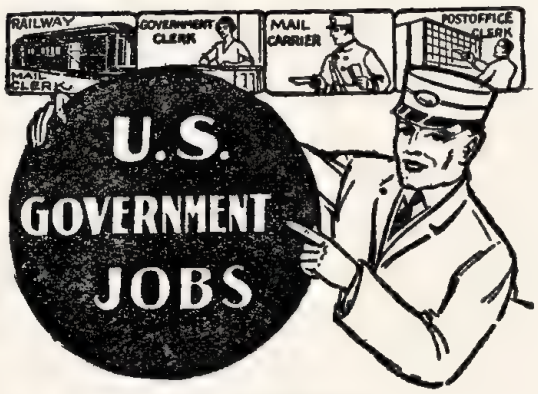

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(Continued from page 149)

"I got him. It's one of that pair of punchers that Dixon hired in town. He ain't clean dead."

This information loosened the tension in the cabin. Sam Harmon appeared in the doorway. "Bring him up and we'll see what he knows. This picture is shapin' up better every minute." He laughed, and within the cabin the laugh was echoed by other men.

"Be sure his pal ain't skulkin' around some'ers," cautioned a new voice.

The guard scoffed. "There ain't been but one set of hoofs trailin' us—I made sure of that. I'll linger around out here to make certain none of the boys ridin' through to deeper country gets nosy. You gents get on with your job!

Dusty began crawling up on the careless guard. Threats and curses were now coming from the cabin and once he heard the high, angry voice of Lucas Morgan.

The guard sauntered close and Dusty crouched for the spring. The man halted, his body quivering with an instinct of danger, but the warning came too late. Dusty's gun crashed against his head and he crumpled to earth.

Dusty made sure he was out for plenty of time, then he hurried toward the cabin. Careless voices were rolling out threats; even the door had not been closed. Again advice his dad had hammered home, came back to him. "When you're enterin' the lion's den, don't take nothin' for granted. Canvass ever' inch of shadow." He started to investigate the bunched saddle horses, then tossed the idea aside as too costly in time. A crisis was nearing within the cabin. A few extra minutes might mean Lucas Morgan's life.

Then Sam Harmon's voice tolled out like a funeral bell: "Talk up, or you die, Morgan!"

"You mean talk up *and* die! Go ahead, let your killer pull the trigger!"

"Gettin' tough, huh?"

"Just getting tired of being told it's

my time to die. Better shoot me before you change your mind and decide to make me president of the firm."

"Hear him, boys, tough as whang-leather! Wants to be shot nice and easy, no mess or nothin'. Put that gun away, Spooky. This gent is goin' to learn that Sam Harmon knows ways to make men beg to talk. Morgan, how'd you like to be hung by your thumbs and rocks fastened to your toes?"

This brought a laugh.

"Maybe it'd stretch him out till he'd be man-sized, Sam." This was from Bart Cruthers.

"Or maybe you'd like the feel of a brandin' iron, Morgan," Harmon goaded. "Better change your mind and tell us where to find that jailbird, and buy yourself an easy death."

Dusty advanced as rapidly as he dared. If Sam Harmon should sense a rift in his plans, he'd kill Lucas Morgan on the instant. Haste took him on a direct line for the cabin door. The figure standing among the five saddled horses went unnoticed.

CHAPTER SIX

Fighting Partners

FOUR men were inside the cabin beside Lucas Morgan and Jock Miller. Two of them shot their hands ceilingward at Dusty's sharp command. Then Sam Harmon slowly began to elevate. Enoch Rider stood motionless.

"Get 'em up, Rider—no monkeyin'!"

The old gunie lifted his hands shoulder-high. His eyes were still, but wariness fanned in their depth. Unlike Bart Cruthers, he was not afraid, nor did he have the trapped animal crouch of Sam Harmon.

"Shuck your hardware—one at a time. You start, Cruthers. Come down with your left and unbuckle that gunbelt. You know what'll happen if there's a false move!"

(Continued on page 152)

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(Continued from page 151)

Dusty Dixon stood in the doorway, two guns into his hands, his mind centered on the movements of the four men in front of him. Then, too late, he felt a presence behind him. The warning cry of Lucas Morgan stabbed the silence as a voice broke from the outside blackness.

A gun plowed into Dusty's back and a hot breath fanned his neck.

"The young wildcat of Cactus Springs! Drop them guns and reach!"

Dusty's two .45's never wavered from the four men.

"The picture changes," he said. "I figured to get all you fellows, but now I'll only get two. The devil better start swingin' open the gates, 'cause there's three of us ready to hit the skids for hell!"

Sam Harmon's vest button was in line with one of the steady guns. A squeezed trigger was all it would take.

"Drop them guns and lay your hackles, Dixon," Harmon said. "If you want to come over to my side of the fence in this fight, you and me can do business."

Dusty knew it was a ruse, but killing Harmon and Enoch Rider wouldn't solve the problem for Morgan and Jock Miller. The remaining men would kill them to seal their lips; probably go on with looting Gray Bluffs. The only hope was to appear to consider Harmon's offer.

"I reckon you and me might pull together, Harmon," Dusty said.

"Sure. Drop them guns and listen to a proposition."

Dusty Dixon let the two guns thud to the dirt floor.

Bart Cruthers' breath cut from his lungs in a relieved gulp. Sam Harmon rubbed his hands together and nodded for the men to close in.

"This is the richest haul of all, boys. We'll bump Morgan off pronto and we'll fix things to look like the ex-convict killed both him and Miller. You was a fool, Dixon, for ever buttin' into my fight. Sam Harmon don't stand for outsiders

hornin' into his game. That's the only kind of business I got to talk with you."

Old Enoch smiled faintly. "You look about right now, kid, standin' with empty hands pawin' the air. This will kinda lay the idea that you're such a hell-tootin' badman. They ain't none of us that can't be counted, kid—none of us!"

"Findin' them all three this way will kill any squawk the girl can make," Sam Harmon explained. "Besides, she won't stay in the country. The sheriff's purty smart at makin' things look the way I want."

Enoch Rider walked to Miller and straightened him in his chair. He threw a dipper of water in the slumping puncher's face. "Come out of it and watch the fun, cowboy. We're gettin' ready to salivate a tough cub—see if he dies as tough as he lives."

DUSTY looked up. Did those tones belong to old Enoch? He met the sunken eyes direct, and in the instant of locked glances, they seemed to understand each other again. In prison Enoch had given him courage by a long, hard glance.

Anger boiled inside the kid as he pulled his glance away. Now was no time for thoughts of that year in prison. He must keep his mind clear and watch for a careless move, for men who had their victim out-numbered five to one were apt to feel too sure. Back there in that solidly built ranch house, a girl was pinning all her hopes on him; and the little runt sitting straight as a soldier was looking at him with hope still burning.

Enoch was gloating, and that was strange for the old outlaw. He drew his gun from leather and caressingly ran his fingers along the barrel. He smiled faintly as he moved in close to Dusty, his thumb-nail tapping on the satin walnut of the handle.

Tap—tap, tap, tap—tap—tap.

Rememberance swept over Dusty Dix-

(Continued on page 154)

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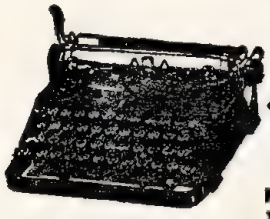

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(Continued from page 153)

on. Enoch had talked to him that way in prison. And he was talking to him now—plainly! He was saying: "Be ready—"

The deep-set eyes passed over the kid's face, made sure he understood. Then Enoch walked over and again roughly straightened the slumping Jock Miller. His hand whisked in close to the puncher's body. Dusty caught a dull glimmer. *Steel!* Enoch was arming Jock!

"Snap into somethin', cowboy," he goaded. "Watch a tough cub die. It might help when your turn comes."

Enoch looked the room over. Calmly he jockied his companions into favorable positions, calmly he selected his own position. He kicked one of Dusty's guns as he walked toward the wall, kicked it closer. His only swift move was when he reached toward the old holster riding his thigh.

"Get 'em up or die, gents!"

Enoch Rider was the cold, calculating killer. There was an instant of electric hate before death bared its naked fangs. Then the room was sheeted in flame. Enoch had the advantage of surprise, Harmon of numbers.

No quarter was asked as the roar of guns mingled with the curses of the men. Dusty dropped to earth, fingers closing on his gun. As he fired into the vortex, the man at his back slanted a bullet downward. The warm blood washed over his cheek as he continued to trigger. Jock Miller was on the floor too, and his hand had lanced flame as he fell. Old Enoch, back to the wall, was firing with deadly swiftness.

Darkness closed in on Dusty, and his gun felt very heavy as he pressed a last trigger. Enoch's weapon was still spitting—no, it had ceased. The battle was over. Who had won?

It was only for a second he traveled off, then he was back to the clanging of bells. Voices were mixed with the shrill ringing. Then came Sam Harmon's laugh.

(Continued on page 156)

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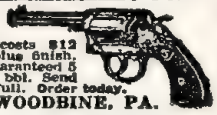

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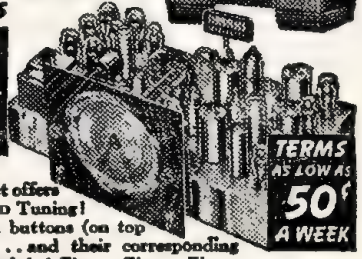

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(Continued from page 154)

Dusty felt for his gun and touched a dead man. He took the man's gun for it was well loaded. Enoch must have fired that way while the fellow was slanting that first shot. Enoch was still there, back to the wall, but his knees were sagging. Harmon was advancing toward him, and Harmon was unhurt. His hand was resting on the butt of a gun in an under-arm holster.

"Double-crossed Sam Harmon, huh? All it's goin' to buy you is a cheap funeral. I see it all now. Back yonder in Cactus Springs you give the kid away because you was forced to. The gent that was in the saloon when the Taggert sheriff spotted you for a couple of cons, tipped your hand to me, so you jumped in and talked. Yeah, when your hand was tipped, you talked—so's I'd go on trustin' you!"

Sam Harmon moved another inch closer. "You even took the job of gunnin' the kid—hikin' up the bounty money to make it seem real! And you let that little runt in the saloon get away with a cold bluff. That shoulda pulled the scales off my eyes—old Enoch Rider smartest man on the owlhoot, layin' down to a phony gunman."

His snarling tones faded into a laugh. "I'm goin' to see you die slow, Rider—slow and painful. You're carryin' enough lead to stop an ordinary man, now, but I'm goin' to add another bullet. Not one that will blink you out, but one that will put you down on the ground. Snakes like you belongs on the floor—crawlin'!"

HUNCHED and low-voiced, the old gunman answered. Weak as he was, his tones were even. "That's about the way she happened, Harmon, but don't think it's any smartness of yours that's puttin' you on top. It's due to me and the kid gettin' off to a bad start. That cub was smart enough to lift your scalp, but I gummed the works for him—slowed him

(Continued on page 158)

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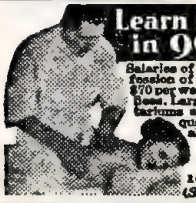

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(Concluded from page 156)

up when I pretended to play along with you."

Harmon's fingers clamped on the butt of his gun as a soft sound stirred behind him. He spun about to meet the sage-gray eyes of Dusty Dixon.

The dancing lantern light cut across the kid's bloodstained face, slid off his easy right hand. That hand rested on his gun. "It's you and me for the finish, Harmon," he said, his voice worn thin. "I'm takin' over this fight for Enoch."

"Kid," Harmon whispered from a dry throat," you and me—you and me can split Gray Bluffs."

"Let's not drag this on, Harmon. Go for your cutter!"

Sam Harmon whipped his gun. For years, his artistry had been flawless, but in the gray eyes before him he read his fate. A low curse cut from his lips as he pressed trigger.

Again the cabin shook to the roar of guns. Two reports beat against the walls and shuddered away into echoes. Sam Harmon pitched to the floor face down. Dusty Dixon weaved back, fresh blood staining his shoulder. He dug deeply for the strength to meet old Enoch's eyes.

"Are you hurt bad, Enoch?" he asked.

"Not mortal, kid. How about you?"

"Nothin' but a few hen scratches."

Cut loose, Morgan helped Dusty dress Enoch's and Jock Miller's wounds. While Dusty bound the hands of two men who were reviving, the little fellow stood by offering suggestions gleaned from his recent experience.

"I got a job as foreman of Gray Bluffs," Dusty said to Enoch as they sipped at the hot coffee. "When I took it, I figured I was fixin' things up for both of us—off the owlhoot, like you told me. How about you, Enoch?"

"Sounds about right, kid," old Enoch answered, and Lucas Morgan confirmed it with a smile.

THE END

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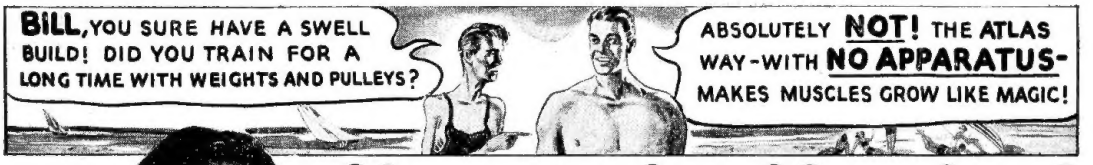
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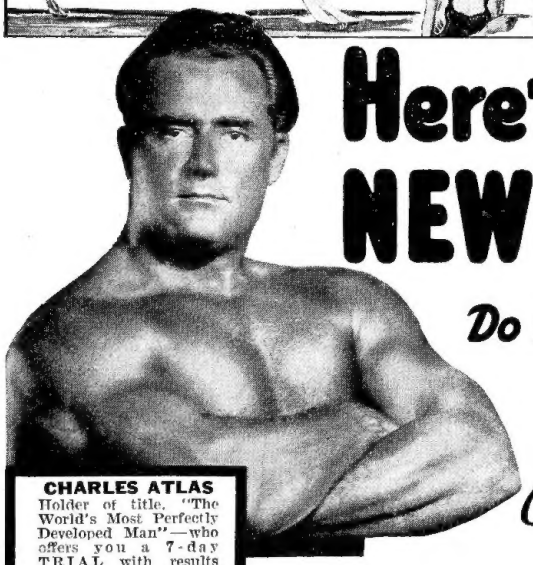
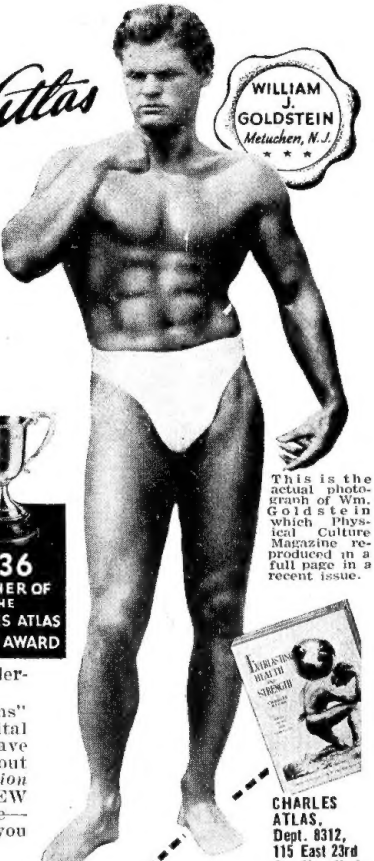


CHARLES ATLAS
Holder of title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man"—who offers you a 7-day TRIAL with results guaranteed.

BY *Charles Atlas*



WILLIAM J. GOLDSTEIN
Metuchen, N.J.

This is the actual photograph of Wm. Goldstein which Physical Culture Magazine reproduced in a full page in a recent issue.

Men—meet William J. Goldstein, of Metuchen, N. J., winner of my 1936 Sterling Silver Cup! A smashing example of what my *Dynamic Tension can do!* Look at his sculptured stomach muscles—perfectly proportioned arms—beautiful leg muscles—giant shoulders. Read what he says. **"It seems like just yesterday that I mailed you that coupon. Look at me NOW! Your *Dynamic Tension* is the only system that can develop a build like mine—right in the privacy of a fellow's own home! No weights. No pulleys. No freak drugs or diets. I'm proud of the way you have made me an 'Atlas Champion'!"**

Do *you* want a prize-winning body like this? Are *you* fed up with having no strength, no vigor, being only HALF-ALIVE? Then listen—

Give Me 7 Days and I'll Prove I Can Make YOU a Champion!

That's all I ask—SEVEN DAYS! In just ONE WEEK I'll absolutely PROVE that I can give you, too, the kind of body men respect and women admire! You will actually see and feel the improvement in even this short time.

I was once a skinny, timid weakling of only 97 lbs. I didn't know what real health or strength were. I was afraid to fight, ashamed to be seen in a swimming suit.

Then I discovered the amazing secret that changed me, like magic, into "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man"—the title I won *twice* and have held *ever since*, against all comers. My secret is *Dynamic Tension*. It is the *tested, natural* method of developing you *inside and out!* It not only can give YOU the powerful rippling muscles you'd like to see in your own mirror . . . it *also* digs down into your system after such needless, joy-killing conditions as ordinary constipation, pimples, indigestion, underweight and overweight.

I have no use for "contraptions" that can do your heart and other vital organs more harm than good. I have no pills or other queer ideas about body-building. My *Dynamic Tension* method is all it takes to make a NEW MAN of you in double-quick time—and I'm ready to PROVE it to you in a 7-day TRIAL OFFER.

Book of Photographs—FREE

Let me show you the amazing results produced for thousands of other men! I'll send you FREE my famous book, **"Everlasting Health and Strength."** It shows actual photos. It tells exactly what I can now do for **your** body! Write your name and address carefully on Coupons. Mail to me personally **today.** I'll rush your free copy to you AT ONCE! Charles Atlas, Dept. 8312, 115 East 23rd Street, New York, N. Y.

CHARLES ATLAS,
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115 East 23rd St., New York, N. Y.

I want the proof that your system of **Dynamic Tension** will make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscle development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

Name.....
(Please print or write plainly)
Address.....
City.....State.....

"Do smokers appreciate the Costlier Tobaccos in Camels?"

A QUESTION ASKED BY MANY PEOPLE ——

THE BEST ANSWER IS...

Camels are the Largest-Selling cigarette in America!

HELEN HICKS, golf champion: "I smoke Camels constantly without a sign of 'jittery nerves.' I know Camels are the last word in mildness."

SIR HUBERT WILKINS: "Where I go, Camels go with me. Camels help make my monotonous explorer's diet digest more smoothly."

Camels have given more people more pleasure than any other cigarette!

AND this didn't happen by chance. Camels are the largest-selling cigarette in America ... and in the *world* ... because people *can* and *do* appreciate finer, costlier tobaccos.

Millions of men and women have given Camels the severest test—they have smoked them steadily. And have learned to trust those finer tobaccos to give them more of the pleasure they want in smoking. If you are not a Camel smoker, try them. See if you, too, don't find more enjoyment in *Camel's finer, costlier tobaccos.*

NEW CAMEL CARAVAN—2 great shows in a single hour's entertainment!

Includes "Jack Oakie College" and Benny Goodman's "Swing School"! Every Tuesday night at 9:30 pm E.S.T., 8:30 pm C.S.T., 7:30 pm M.S.T., 6:30 pm P.S.T., WABC-CBS.

JOSELYN LIBBY, private secretary: "When I feel fatigued, I take time out for a Camel and get a quick 'lift.'"

SHIP'S ENGINEER, G. Buckingham: "I've smoked Camels for years. I never tire of them."

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Camels are a matchless blend of finer, **MORE EXPENSIVE TOBACCOS** —Turkish and Domestic.